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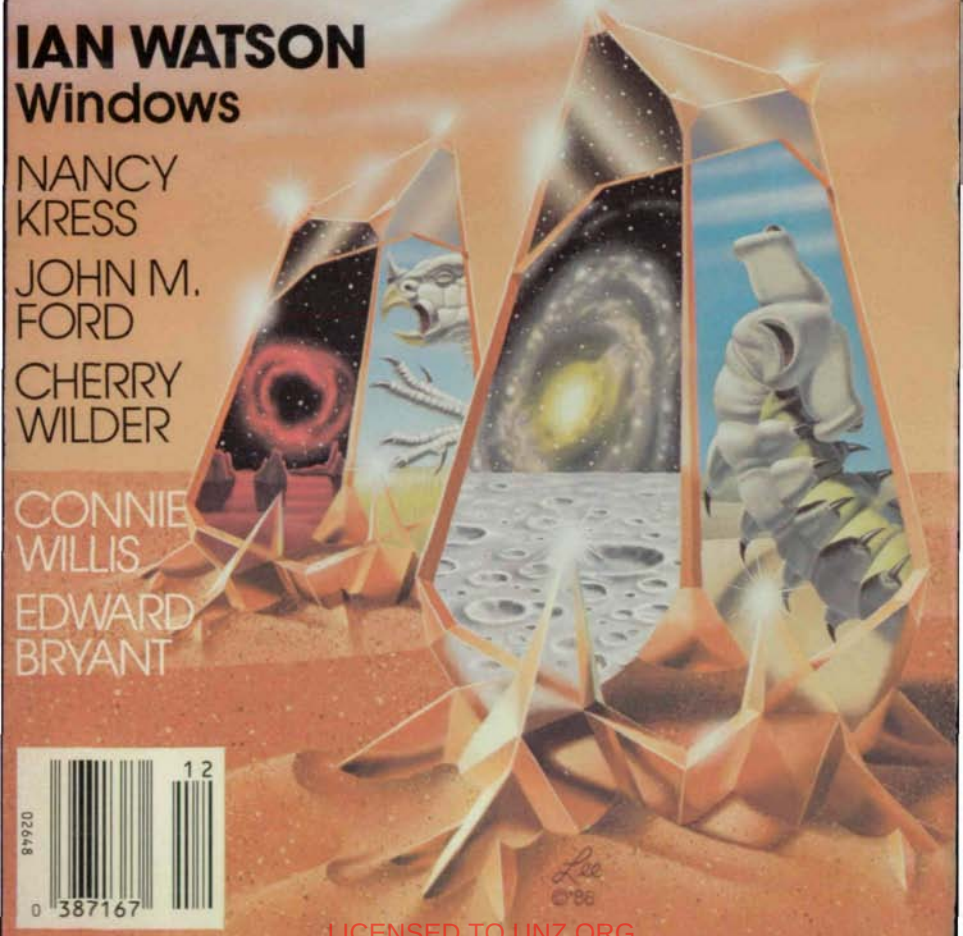

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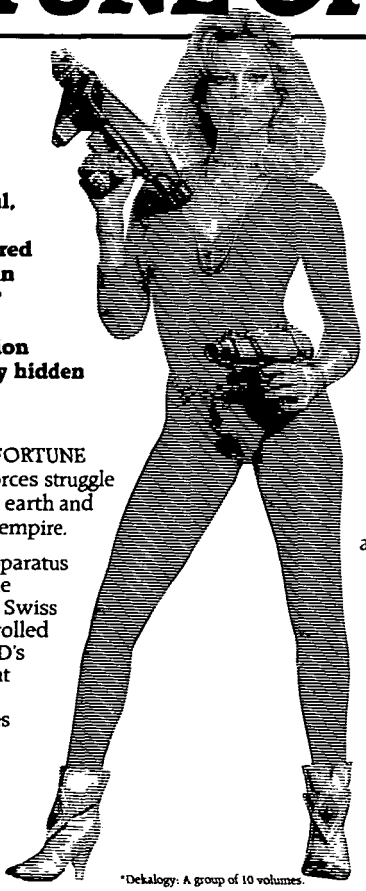

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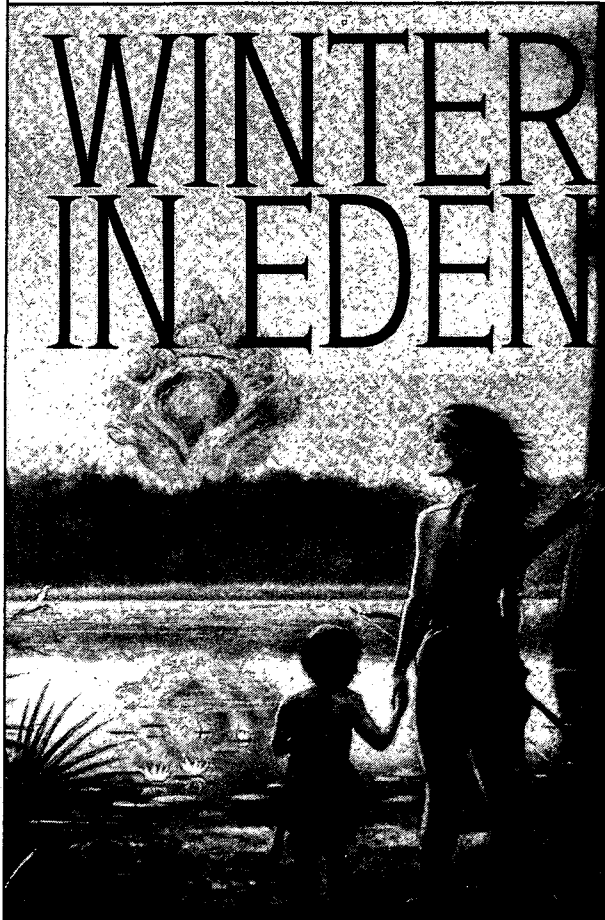

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

THE UNICORN

A recent anthology I helped edit is entitled *Mythical Beasties* and contains thirteen fantasies, each featuring a different well-known but non-existent animal. Of course, that's fantasy, not science fiction, but I got to thinking—

People of all ages and places have, at one time or another, invented non-existent animals and added copious detail. The process is very likely the same as that which science fiction writers use to invent extraterrestrial creatures. Our ET organisms are as non-existent and, if we're lucky, as plausible, as those that are invented for myths and legends. Perhaps the same process is involved, and if we consider the legendary creatures we may get some insight into a way in which we build up zoological and botanical denizens of a world circling Alpha Centauri A.

Picking a mythological beast at random, let's consider the unicorn. How did the unicorn come to be imagined?

To many a person it *wasn't* imagined. It was real. The evidence? The very best. The unicorn is mentioned in the Bible, and the Bible is God's word, is it not?

Here's a Biblical description of God: "God hath brought them [the Israelites] out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn." (Numbers 23:22). Another description—this time of the tribe of Joseph: "His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns:" (Deuteronomy 33:17).

God asks Job the following question: "Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow?" (Job 39:10). The psalmist begs God, "Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou has heard me from the horns of the unicorns." (Psalms 22:21). He also says, "But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn." (Psalms 92:10). And Isaiah says, "And the unicorns shall come down with them . . ." (Isaiah 34:7).

Of course the Bible from which I have been quoting isn't the inspired word, exactly. It is the Authorized Version (the King James) and it is only a translation. The translators may, after all, have made a mistake. The Hebrew word translated as "unicorn" is, in each case, "re'em." What does that *really* mean?

If we turn to the "New English

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Bible," the most accurate translation yet made, we find that the Numbers quotation reads as follows: "What its curving horns are to the wild ox, God is to them, who brought them out of Egypt." In every other reference I've cited, "re'em" is translated as "wild ox."

The wild ox is the "aurochs" (from a German word meaning "primeval ox"). Its scientific name is "Bos primigenius," which is Latin for "ox, first-born." It is probably the ancestor of domestic cattle. It was a large and fierce bovine, standing six feet at the shoulder, with large horns, spreading far outward. The horns and strength of the wild ox were worth using metaphorically, but the animal is no more. The last living aurochs is supposed to have died in Poland in 1627.

But how did we ever go from "wild ox" to "unicorn"?

Well, the Assyrians carved wild oxen in bas-relief to serve, I presume, as symbols of strength and vigor. The Assyrians, however, were not masters of perspective. They carved a side-view and simplified matters by letting the horn on the side of the viewer overlap exactly the far horn.

What one saw was a single horn, so the Greeks called it, slangily, "monokeros" ("one-horn" in Greek) and that became the word for "re'em" in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible. In the Latin translation of the Bible it became "unicorn" ("one-horn" in

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Latin) and unicorn it stayed in the King James.

Of course, the Biblical references speak only of horns and strength. Where do the rest of our notion of the unicorn come from? For that we have to turn to non-Biblical sources.

About 400 B.C., there was a Greek physician and scholar, named Ctesias, who lived for some years in Persia and who wrote a history of the Asian kingdoms: Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, and India.

In his books (which have not survived and which we know of only from scattered commentaries by other Greek writers) he referred to one Indian animal which he described as a kind of wild ass, white in color, and with an eighteen-inch-long, straight horn in its forehead. That is essentially the picture of the unicorn we have to this day—a graceful horse-like creature with one long horn in its forehead.

We can guess that no such creature exists. If it was horse-like then it must belong to the group of animals that include the horses, asses, and zebras, and not one of this group, not one, either living or extinct, has ever had horns, let alone a single horn. Consequently, any report that the unicorn is horse-like can't be so.

Where did Ctesias get his description from, then? He was probably an honest man who did his best to tell the truth, but people do tend to be gullible, and he was undoubtedly repeating hearsay that had become distorted even before it had reached his ears.

As it happens, there *is* a one-horned animal in India—the Indian rhinoceros. Of course, the horn is not a true horn but a concretion of hair. It is not on the forehead, but on the snout. It is not long and straight but rather short and curved. And although the rhinoceros is more closely related to the horse than it is to the wild ox, it is not horse-like in appearance.

Could there be a confusion with another animal? Very likely. There is an antelope called the oryx, rather rare now, but common in ancient times, when it was found widely in Arabia and Babylonia. It has a long horse-like face, so that it might be considered to be a kind of wild ass (even though it isn't). And on its head, it has two long, straight horns, so that it is sometimes called the scimitar-horned oryx. Seen from the side, the two horns overlap and you seem to see a one-horned horse-like creature.

Ctesias might thus have combined the appearance of the oryx, which he must have seen, and which he must have known had two horns, however it might have seemed like one from the side, with the tale of the strange Indian animal that travelers agreed had only a single horn.

It was the horn that made the unicorn so valuable to people who believed in its existence. All kinds of wild legends grew up about the horn. It was supposed to be an aphrodisiac if it was ground up and

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added to drinks. It was also supposed to be a supreme antidote to poison, so that the powder some might think would increase one's manly vigor, others might think would purify and make harmless the wildest poisons. Either way, the horn was something greatly to be desired.

Naturally, people, such as sailors, who were known to have traveled to far countries and to have seen strange sights were likely to be believed if they came back with horns they said had been obtained from unicorns. They could sell those horns at enormous prices, and they often did.

The horns that were thus sold to gullible land-lubbers were indeed long and straight, and were also twisted into a tight left-handed spiral. It is for this reason that most drawings of unicorns show the horn to be twisted in such a spiral.

Where did sailors get such horns?

Well, there is a small whale, about 15 feet long, called the "narwhal," a name which may come from a Scandinavian expression meaning "corpse-whale" because of its dead white color. Its scientific name is Monodon monoceros, which is Greek for "one-tooth, one-horn."

Despite the Greek name, the narwhal has two teeth. In the male narwhal, however, the left tooth develops into a straight tusk, sticking forward out of the mouth, a tusk which may grow to be as much as 9 feet long, half the length of the body or more. The tusk is grooved in a left-hand spiral and looks exactly like the horn we see in pictures of the unicorn.

In fact, the unicorn horn *is* the narwhal tusk, for that is what sailors tended to bring home and palm off on the unsophisticated as the genuine, miracle-working horn of the unicorn.

And now we see how a mythological animal gets its form and shape. It is usually built up out of bits and reminiscences from real animals. Contributing to the unicorn in one way or another are the wild ox, the rhinoceros, the oryx, and the narwhal.

And this is how science fiction writers tend to get their extraterrestrial creatures, too. It is very difficult to be totally original.

Once, though, there was a very early story I wrote (in 1940 actually) called "Half-Breeds on Venus" which made the cover of the magazine in which it appeared. The artist drew a creature that looked very dinosaurian, except that it had a single fang right in the front of its upper jaw. No such single fang is to be found in any bilateral animal, living or extinct, and it was beautifully original. I thought it was the only good thing about the story. (To be sure, Ollie the Dragon in "Kukla, Fran, and Ollie" had just such a fang, but he came along years later.) ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

As a lifelong science fiction fan and a lifelong pacifist, I find myself in an uncomfortable situation. I believe that exploration of space is crucial to the growth of the human race. However, I find it difficult to support a government agency that devotes a significant effort to military development, which, unfortunately, NASA always has.

Over half of the space shuttle's flights were intended to be military in nature, and following the tragic loss of the Challenger, the Pentagon vowed to exercise its priority and to "bump" civilian flights.

It upsets me that funds and public support intended for human expansion should be diverted to military projects (especially when the armed forces already receive nearly half of federal revenues). I would not like to see NASA go the way of the Department of Energy. It also distresses me that I cannot participate in a venture of this importance without also aiding ventures I find repugnant.

Surprisingly, there has been almost no public discussion of this matter. If you share my concern, perhaps you would consider writing an editorial in *IAsfm* about it.

Fannishly,

Eric Kollenberg
Indianapolis, IN

I share your discomforts in this matter.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

If this were a letter describing my feelings about your magazine in general, it would be very favorable, as most of the letters you print have been lately. But I am writing about your letters column in particular, and I would like to add a sour note to the chorus of sweet praise I've had to listen to these past few months.

I believe in giving credit where credit is due, and for two years I've had a smile on my face whenever *IAsfm* comes in the mail. I've enjoyed following the various controversies that have raged, especially the long one that followed the "Ideas vs. Characterization" Viewpoint articles. Whether I agreed with the readers or not, the letters you chose to print were always intelligent and fascinating.

Your letter writers nowadays are as intelligent as ever, but not so fascinating. After reading over a page of praise by Mr. Peterson in your April 1986 issue, I felt it was time to write. It was interesting to me that the only negative letter in that issue immediately followed Mr. Peterson's. I suppose you

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thought you should tone down all this lavish praise (not undeserved, mind you) with something critical.

I don't mean you should publish a bunch of sour grapes letters. But there should be more magazine-inspired debate and less letters of commendation for articles that regular readers like myself already know were very good indeed.

Respectfully yours,

Louis D. Hertz
Ventnor, NJ

As nearly as we can manage, we try to make the letter column representative of the views of the readers. Of course, not every reader writes, and of those who write, some handwrite unintelligibly, some write seven-page letters, some seem to us to be uninteresting, and so on. By the time we eliminate what we think must be eliminated, we are limited in what we can do—but we do our best.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

While I have always enjoyed your magazine and tend to be annoyed with people who have to write in to voice what are often petty complaints, I was disappointed by the reviews that Mr. Searles provided in the mid-December issue. Firstly, I was upset by the uneven treatment of various authors and works. The column informed us that A. E. Van Vogt's two Null-A novels had appeared originally in *Analog*, but didn't bother to mention that David Brin's "The Postman" (Nov. '82) and "Cyclops" (Mar. '84), along with Robert Silverberg's "Sailing to Byzantium" (Feb. '85), have been published in your very own magazine. It makes me want to ask if Mr. Searles reads the magazine in which his column appears.

My main concern is not, however, the fact that prior publication was not acknowledged, but that the information that I would have liked to have been presented with was not there. I would have been, and still am, interested in knowing how much additional or new material is available in these books. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the stories as they appeared in your magazine, but before buying the books, I would like to have an indication whether or not the purchase is worthwhile. In the past I have bought books based on Mr. Searles' reviews and have not been disappointed. I feel that he has omitted a vital bit of information from these reviews.

I would also like to add my expression of appreciation for the fine work that Shawna McCarthy has done as editor. I think that we all will miss the "beauteous Shawna" although, like most of your readers, I have only the Good Doctor's statement upon which to base my description of Ms. McCarthy. I have enjoyed the magazine under her editorship and can only hope that her replacement suits my tastes as well.

Finally, what letter would be complete without a complaint about format? You can file this one under "Petty Complaints" if you want; nonetheless, I have to ask: Does anyone, anywhere, really think that anyone, at any time, buys *IAsfm* because of the silly little yellow triangle that boldly proclaims

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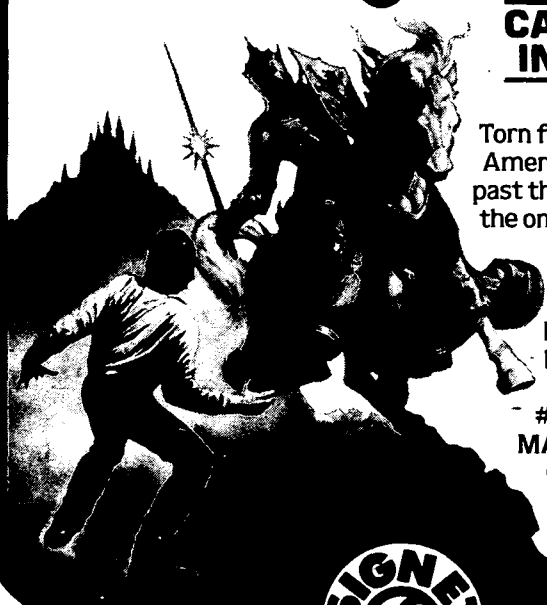

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that the magazine contains 192 pages? I do not go to the magazine rack with calculator in hand, pick up copies of *IAsfm* and *Omni*, count the number of pages and divide by the cost to see which is the better bargain. The content is what is important, which is the reason that I read your magazine. I also appreciate the trouble that you must go through to provide appropriate cover art and wonder why something as meaningless as the number of pages has to be stuck on.

I would like to end by saying thank you for all the enjoyable hours that I have spent reading your magazine and to say "Keep up the good work."

Sincerely,

Fred Podealuk,
Scarborough, Ontario
Canada

I think it is safe to suppose that Baird Searles reads this magazine. If he doesn't mention where "The Postman" and "Sailing to Byzantium" first appeared, it's because he probably supposes that the readers (being readers of this magazine) know. Besides, if he emphasized the origin, you could bet dollars to maravedis that some readers would say he was just trying to plug the magazine.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor, Mr. Dozois, and *Asimov's* staff:

I just received the March 1986 issue of *Asimov's* in the mail and the first thing I noticed was the new glossy cover stock. I love it! It seems to give the artwork a very clean look, and it may protect the magazine better, as this copy came through the mail in better condition than any previously, and best of all, my address label came off easily, without leaving a mark! I hope this wasn't an unique circumstance.

I'd also like to mention that I've enjoyed William Gibson's *Count Zero* and hope it won't be your last serial, if you can find other long works as well-written. I'm looking forward to finishing this fine story. (Yes, I was so taken with the new cover stock I wrote this before I'd even opened the magazine.)

Keep up the good work, and congratulations on your new job, Mr. Dozois!

Sincerely,

Augustin Gauba
North Hollywood, CA

Thank you. Our Chestertonian editor is not what I (or anyone) would call beauteous, but he is good-natured, highly intelligent, hard-working, and competent. What's more, he doesn't smoke so the office smells cleaner and better.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I recently saw the movie *Enemy Mine*. I am writing to you because the story on which it is based appeared in your magazine in the September 1979 issue, and because I want to generate a bit of discussion from other readers, rather than have a Hollywood insider toss the letter without thought.

I suppose that if I saw the movie without reading the story, I probably would say that it was good (but not great) with good acting,

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decent sets, and usually a good sense of a fully realized world..

However, on hearing the movie was to appear I started thinking about Barry Longyear's story of the same name, the letters of praise in your column, and the awards that it won. After noticing differences between the movie and what I remembered from the story, I found the back issue and read the story again. At that point I began to be appalled at what Hollywood had done to a great story.

Although the movie kept many of the same scenes as the book, in other scenes many details were changed, and then the ending was entirely different. In the scenes that were slightly different, such as building a shelter for protection from the meteor showers instead of finding a cave out of the harsh weather, the basic plot was left intact so the changes were somewhat inconsequential. If they were minor, why did the script writer feel compelled to change them, especially since he was changing an award winner?

But the totally different ending is what is bothering me. The movie ending seemed to be a Hollywood standard, full of battles and chases; in a word: action. On the other hand, the story discussed the need to fight loneliness, alienation, acceptance by those very different, conforming to society, and a whole host of other things that only further pondering will reveal. The story gives a lot to think about, while the movie is quickly dismissed. The story is great, worthy of awards as the best of science fiction. The movie is merely good, possibly worthy of awards in acting (it's not easy being a lizard) or special effects that aren't so special anymore.

I am also bothered by the practice of putting out a novelization of the movie script. I'm sure the plot of the novel follows the plot of the movie, while the much better original can only be found in back issues of this magazine.

This movie has become a good example of the standard attitude of filmmakers towards science fiction. They seem to be making science fiction movies for the adolescents and feel that an adolescent must have lots of action to keep his or her attention. They feel adolescents can't handle the larger issues of life and literature that the story contains. I think a good many teenagers would be insulted with that attitude; I am personally very insulted by it. I think back to many of the other examples of science fiction that filmmakers have produced, including some of the blockbusters, and find little of the speculation into alternate views of life and consequences of new technology that make science fiction literature such a treasure.

I must confess that I attended and enjoyed many of the blockbusters of science fiction, but that is part of a different problem. Filmmakers follow the principle of make more of whatever makes money. I would like to encourage the making of more science fiction movies, and in a sense, vote for that by seeing the ones that are made. (Of course I do enjoy what I see, even though I stop thinking about it by the time I reach the parking lot.) How does one encourage the making of great science fiction movies

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without discouraging the making of them altogether?

I am now wondering what kind of movie would result if the script writer had been faithful to Mr. Longyear's story. It probably would be thoughtful and illuminate many aspects of life. It would be a great movie, just like the story is a great story. But considering the Hollywood view of science fiction, it would not be made.

Sincerely,

Paul Kinney
Westland, MI

PS: Keep up the great work on this great magazine!

Please remember that very few people read and that very many people watch movies and television. Moviemakers make their films for the latter group and give them what they think they want. Presumably, they are right, for films make much more money than books do. (They also lose much more money than books do.) Of course, you may think that making money isn't the be-all and the end-all, but I doubt that most people would follow the reasoning.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I read David George's letter about illustrations in the April issue. I disagree with him, and being an aspiring artist myself, I thought my input might be helpful.

The illustrations in the magazine (which I consider excellent) are not standing alone; they are to relate to and help convey the feeling of the stories. Therefore, a picture need not always be of a wild alien landscape or a space scene. As for smiles, aren't we constantly bombarded with them in other magazines?

Smile or no smile, the purpose of the illustrations is to depict an important scene or idea from the story, to give the reader a feeling for the story, and to spark his imagination. I think the pictures in your magazine do so very well and need no modification.

Sincerely,

Miranda Piccirillo
Huntsville, AL

I once published a paperback mystery, and on the cover was a woman with a gun. I pointed out indignantly that there was no such scene in the novel and, as a matter of fact, there was no gun anywhere in it. The publishers said, coldly, that they were merely trying to establish the fact that the book was a mystery and not a science fiction novel.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I was struck by an admittedly minor point in your recent editorial that followed up on the question of plagiarism.

I have no reason to doubt your statement that in the 1930s you read all of the science fiction written, but some of it you never discuss or quote from. I wonder why. I myself had a great fondness for *Planet Stories* (I believe that is the correct title) but I never hear you mention it.

By the way, I am perfectly willing to admit that while I am still quite young I was a good deal

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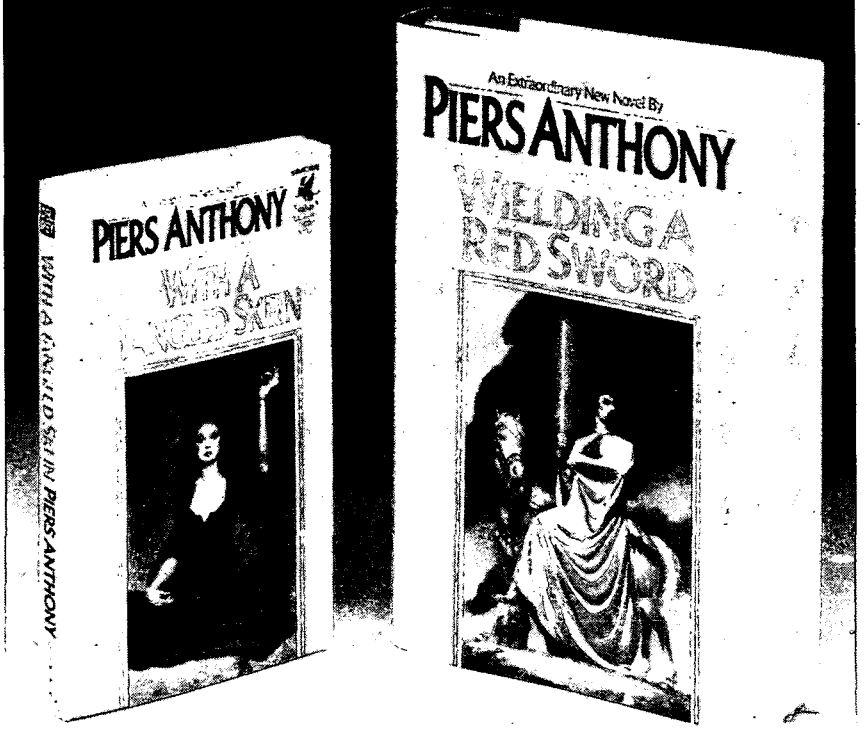

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younger at that time. At that age I thought that the "ideas" in *Planet Stories* were thought provoking (even though today I might not feel there were any there at all). At the very least, they prepared us somewhat for what came later and prompted a somewhat more open mind than was prevalent among our elders concerning beings who were NOT LIKE US.

I would be interested in your thoughts concerning *Planet* and the other pulps.

Sincerely,

Allan B. Wheeler

I know you want me to be honest—so here it is. Back in the old days, I didn't like Planet Stories *and I almost never read it. It was old-fashioned adventure stuff and I wanted the new-fangled technological stuff in* Astounding.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov—

I've been meaning to thank you for a wonderful magazine for a long time now. Thanks!

From time to time you have mentioned the various physical laws which have to be bent or broken to allow interesting science fiction stories to be written. In particular, wonderful things can be imagined when one ignores the real-world prohibition of time travel.

I believe I have found an example of real-life time travel, however! Just a few days ago, I received a "money saver certificate" asking me to renew my subscription. Since my subscription doesn't expire until June 1987, I feel quite sure the certificate was mailed at some time in the future. Even in the 1980s, no magazine would have the audacity to ask for money so far in advance! It must have got caught in a time warp.

Unfortunately, the person who opens my mail threw the envelope away, so I have no absolute proof.

Just thought you'd like to know.

Sincerely,

Bill Mosby

Talking about time travel, I have in my files, a copy of the front page of the New York Times dated March 10, 1075 (sic). I wrote them an indignant letter asking them why there wasn't a word about William of Normandy's devastating campaigns in northern England and the gathering Saracen menace in the Holy Land. They didn't print it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Asimov,

Mr. Haldeman gives an excellent perspective of the emotions of the individual who finds himself in a war, and points out that these emotions are the same regardless of time and technology.

But science fiction addresses more than the level of technology involved in war, it also addresses war as it is currently evolving on our planet. Although I agree that *Rambo* uses gratuitous violence, it does represent a form of conflict with which we are becoming nauseatingly familiar with; i.e., state-sponsored terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Science fiction writers have at one time or another also discussed guerilla war, and the awesome possibility of total nuclear war. What

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I believe distinguishes present day science fiction from fantasy in the treatment of war is the manner in which fantasy has borrowed so heavily from folklore and myths of ancient northwestern Europe. Along with the dragons and the swordplay, fantasy picks up on war as it existed in the past and as it existed prior to the nuclear age. For instance, conflict arises from the pirate/raider, the migratory invasion, the grandiose expanding empire, and the greedy feudal lord snatching an adjoining piece of property. I could give many examples of how these blatant forms of conflict are becoming obsolete in our heavily populated, highly structured, and nuclear-armed world. For instance, Africa. As badly split as Africa is along tribal lines, there will probably be no more wars like Katanga or Biafra. Nor will there ever be another colonial America or Czarist Russia expanding through sparsely settled wilderness with a sense of manifest destiny.

A new chapter of subdued conflict has arisen on the planet. And science fiction as a literary genre is in the best possible position to explore this phenomena.

Sincerely,

George D. Robertson
Eatontown, NJ

Some years ago I wrote a book in which I evaluated all the dangers that pressed upon humanity, and my section on terrorism was excised. It spoiled the book for me, but it's an example of the fact that people feel so helpless in face of it that they'd rather pretend it doesn't exist.

—Isaac Asimov

EDITORS' NOTE:

Long-time readers of *IAsfm* may already have realized that for the first time in 111 issues, we do not have a puzzle column by Martin Gardner. Mr. Gardner has decided, at least temporarily, to cease contributing his pieces to the magazine, so that he can spend more time on the myriad projects he is always at work on.

From the first mind-twisting puzzle, "The Doctors' Dilemma," in our premier issue to the last, "Thang, the Planet Eater," in our November 1986 issue, Mr. Gardner has continuously managed to intrigue, baffle, and amuse us. We will miss his wit, his insights, and his charm, but we wish him the best of luck with his new endeavors.

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

VCR games seems to be an idea whose time has come, even if the games themselves aren't quite "there" yet. It all began auspiciously enough with the release of Parker Brothers' *Clue*. It was an amusing, cleverly designed game that made great use of the videotaped crew of Colonel Mustard, Miss Scarlet, and the rest of the suspects, yet it was able to be replayed many times.

The race was on, and nearly every major game manufacturer sits poised to release a line of VCR games, from Milton Bradley's *Candy Land* to Mattel's *Predicaments*, hosted by Joan Rivers. Now, just out of the chute, with two interesting, yet disappointing games, is Pressman with *Doorways to Adventure* and *Doorways to Horror*.

For any fan of pulp fiction and grade B- genre movies, the premise of each of these games sounds great. In *Doorways to Adventure* players use their fast-forward control to scan to a color-coded doorway. Then a scene from a supposedly "classic" film appears while players secretly bid to win a treasure that is announced at the end of the clip.

There are four kinds of loot to be offered; an art object, jewelry, deeds, and precious metals. Each scene also has a "ransom" that must be paid. This can be satisfied by paying the cash required, or playing an appropriate Power card. The winning bid gets the treasure and, after the ransom is paid, players can draw up to four new Power or Bid cards.

A special die is rolled to show which doorway to scan to, and the next scene is played. Besides protecting a player from certain kinds of ransom, the Power cards also offer opportunities to steal treasures, trade treasures, or share in the good fortune of the winning bidder.

Sounds like fun, doesn't it? Well, yes. Sort of. Make no mistake about it, the card game itself, with its bidding and surprises works very well, but there are some disturbing problems with the use of the tape.

First of all, there's no need for it. None at all. It would be simpler, and more random, to just have a deck of cards with pictures on them. Then there's the clips themselves. The only classic scenes I saw in the first 15 minutes was a shot from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. There was an awful lot of generic western clips, none of any interest. Worst

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of all, the clips have little to do with the scene's required ransom, and two unctuous narrators talk over the whole scene.

Things improve somewhat with *Doorways to Horror*. The clips are all top-drawer, grade D horror clips, with a man in a rubber monster suit emerging from the slime pit, to a beautiful dark-haired beauty melting into a werewolf. And the game has a lot more to do with the videotape.

Each player controls one or more creatures that stand in front of them. As the scene runs, players cast spell points on the creature they think will be the "featured" player. You can also play a card to steal someone's monster and they can do the same to you.

At the end of the scene, the main monster is announced, as well as two other secondary monsters (who happen to have nothing at all to do with the clip). You collect gold for your correct bids, and roll the color die for the next doorway.

This game was decidedly more enjoyable, even if the narrators were still babbling, and the tape was unnecessary. Having the stand-up creatures to cast spells on makes you watch the tape more closely. And these clips are fun to watch.

There is one last problem that affects both games. My VCR has a fast-forward search, but no super-fast "scan." Ergo, I could not "scan" to the next doorway without seeing the intervening scenes. I just let the tape run, stopping at each doorway. Pressman does include a card listing all 60 scenes so you can jot down the tape counter location of each. Then you can fast-forward to each. That's a task I'll pass on.

So, while the games themselves are well-designed and entertaining, the videotape, in both cases, is superfluous. It's a problem for any VCR game, but, as *VCR Clue* demonstrated, it's one that can be, and should be, solved. ●

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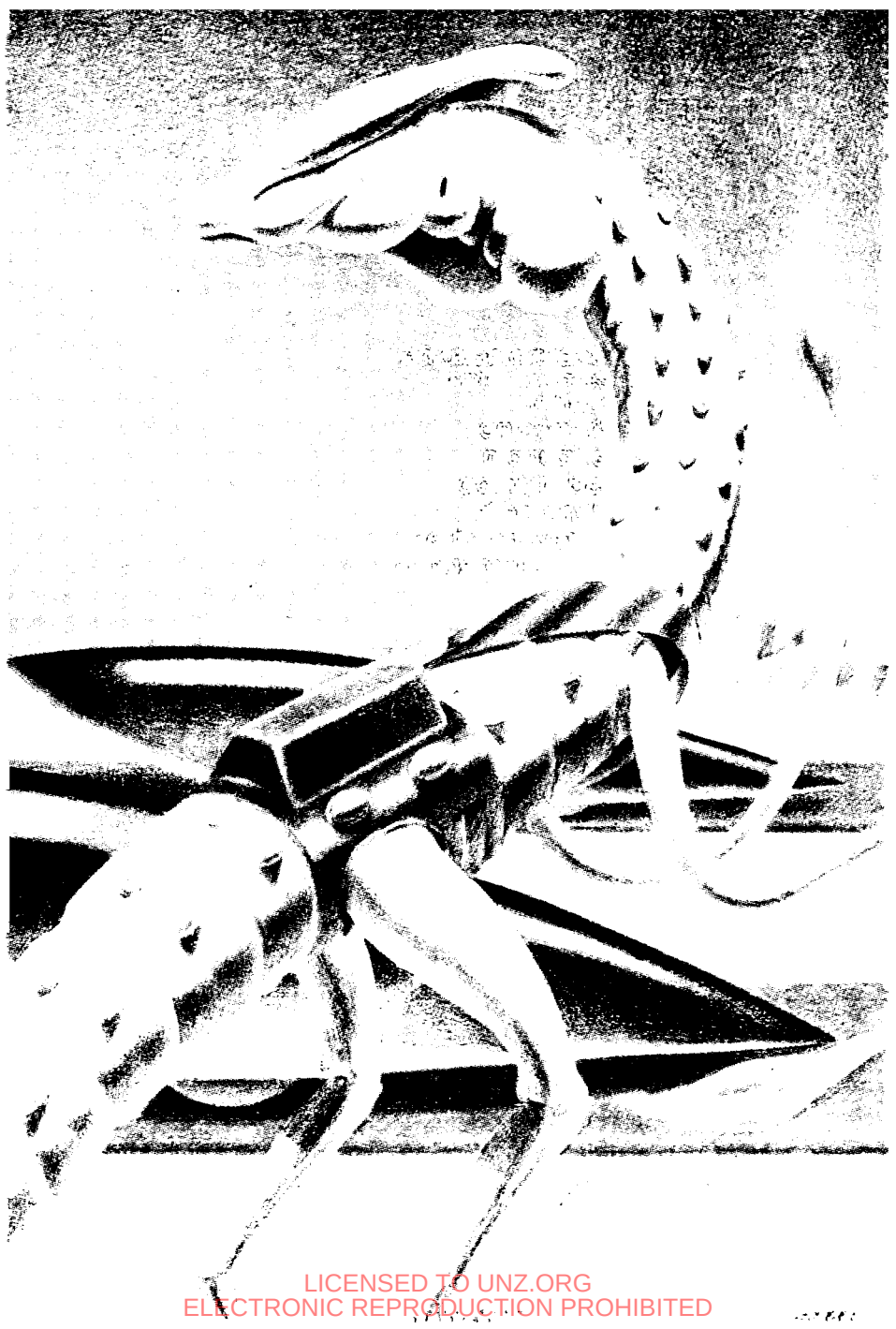

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"Where do Windows come from, Danny?"

"That's easy. They come from Mars."

"Mars is where the Venturer expedition found them. Where do you suppose they originally came from?"

"Can I have a Window for my birthday, Dad?"

"If you can tell me—"

"Unfair! Nobody knows."

"Take a guess."

"Maybe Martians made them."

"What Martians, Danny?"

"Maybe Windows *are* Martians!"

"So how did they make baby Martians?"

"You break off one Window and stick it in the ground on its own. A second Window grows from one of the edges; at, er, forty-five degrees. Then a third Window grows from the second—which makes a triad. A triad of Windows is like a big prism that's hollow."

"What then?"

"Nothing—till you pull a Window loose and start again."

"So for Windows to multiply, you need some busybody to interfere."

"Like bees pollinating flowers."

"Not exactly. You need a creature that's curious and greedy and has hands."

"Or has tentacles. Or claws. Maybe the ancient Martians were—"

"—octopus-crabs?"

"That's silly!"

"Windows don't make much sense either, Danny—unless they were specially planted on Mars for us to find."

"Maybe they just grew naturally out of the Martian soil, like big crystals?"

"And till a few years ago there were just six triads. Now there are millions standing around on Earth, and we're multiplying them all the time."

"Gardeners split plants and spread them everywhere."

"These things aren't plants. We don't know what they are."

"If you think they're invaders, Dad, that's paranoid. Windows can't do a thing without us. My science teacher says that's why they can't be von Neumann machines."

"Can't be what?"

"Machines that reproduce themselves. Named after John von Neumann, the computer wizard. Suppose a race of aliens wants to spread through the universe. The easiest way to do it is to send von Neumann machines to the nearest star systems. These machines mine the asteroids and build more of themselves. Some stay put; most travel on to the next

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nearest stars. The machines which stay either explore the solar system they're in and send messages back to their makers; or else they have DNA blueprints of their makers with them—so they build a crèche and recreate their makers and teach them. But Windows just stand around. Can we have one, Dad?"

"No, we can't have one. It would turn into three."

This is a capsule of a hundred such conversations which Danny and I had before my resistance finally weakened. Our government in its wisdom had decided that any private individuals could own Windows just so long as they bought a Window license—and so long as they were older than eighteen, as if owning a Window was equivalent to driving a car or buying alcohol. It's true that the license system let the government monitor how many Windows there were in the country, and whereabouts—rogue ones excluded! Adding an age limit, as if to protect impressionable youngsters, provided an additional excuse; which was a load of nonsense, since kids had ample opportunity to goggle at Windows—Windows were all over the place. I'm sure the main idea was to raise revenue. Back in the eighteenth century or so the British government had taxed ordinary glass windows. Witness bricked-up frames in various old buildings. Here was window-tax revived in a new guise.

Mark you, *I* didn't mind. I was able to hold out against Danny's pleas for years.

Of course, in the beginning Windows were very expensive: rare marvels from Mars. After six or seven years you could hardly go anywhere without passing a Window; so much had they been multiplied—and their cost reduced—by people's eager hands. I don't suppose you would have seen too many Windows in Outer Mongolia or New Guinea. But most other places on Earth boasted a crop of Windows; privately, publicly, corporately, whichever.

"When I grow up, Daddy, I want to be a Window cleaner!" That was Danny, at age eight. That was the year that his mother Ruth died in a road accident. At that stage Danny had only seen one actual Window, though other examples had been on television. And Danny intuited that if ordinary windows in people's homes needed to be cleaned, why so too would Windows from Mars.

In a sense he was right. During the early years some smart businessmen made a killing by pretending that you needed special skills and chemicals to clean Martian Windows. Nowadays owners just sluiced them down with a garden hose. Windows didn't scratch or grow dull. Nor were they notably fragile, though a brick thrown with enough vigor would destroy one, obliterating the view.

* * *

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The view. . . .

I remember, as if it was yesterday, that first real view Danny and I had through a Martian Window when he was eight.

The Window in question—which was still as costly as a Rolls Royce—was on display in Harrods near the Food Hall. We had to queue for a quarter of an hour to get near.

The thing was like a sheet of plate glass the size of a house door, with a bottom that broadened to support it. The base was set in a bed of soil, and already a second, half-formed Window—blank as yet—was growing from one of the edges, taking its substance from the soil, presumably by osmosis, and perhaps even from the air, which was rich with aromas of roast coffee beans and venison pies and cheeses.

The view through the Window wasn't of the Food Hall beyond but of a moonscape—of craters and boulders, jet-black shadows and a glaring white dusty plain with a bright spatter of stars above. The view was entirely real. You could have stepped through into that lunar landscape—except that nobody could walk through Windows.

The moon was definitely not our own moon. For there were two suns in the sky. One was small, a blinding blue. The other, a fat red orb.

Small hand in large hand, Danny and I gradually worked our way through the crowd round to the other side of the Window. From there, the view was different. The backside showed a meadow of viridian mosses fringed by groves of tree-like ferns whose fronds wafted in a breeze. Lemon daylight; fleecy clouds overhead. Fat furry insects resembling enormous bees flew by.

A window upon an alien world—with alien life on it.

As Windows multiplied over the next few years we found out the range—and limitation—of views on offer.

A good many Windows showed lifeless worlds or moons. Others showed worlds with vegetation and living creatures. Never did any of the creatures appear to be of advanced intelligence. Never did we spy any sort of civilization; nor even the ruins of one.

(Did some Windows show civilized alien beings? And had those particular Windows quickly been sequestered by governments? This hardly seemed likely. New views appeared all the time at random in newly grown Windows. No such secret could have been kept.)

A proportion of Windows showed us views of Earth, and of human beings. Empty landscapes could be pinned down to somewhere in Canada or China, Argentina or Australia. Scenes with people were more immediately locatable: an Italian vineyard, a Japanese railway station.

Conceivably we hadn't yet arrived at a view of an alien civilization. Maybe the first view of such would turn up after fifty million Windows,

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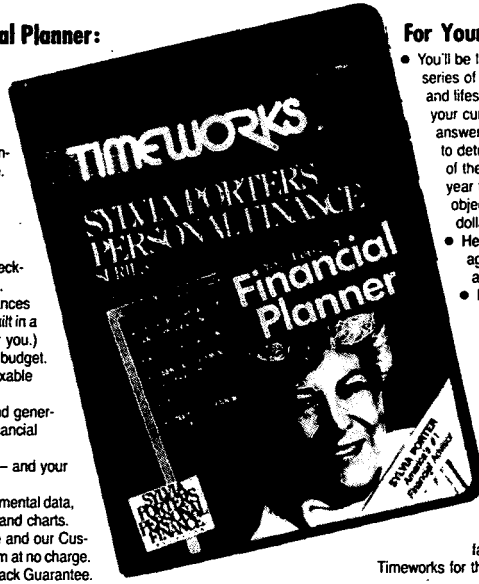

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or a hundred million or more. Was this the inducement? The bait, to persuade us to make more and more Windows?

People continued to pull triads apart and set up each part separately to multiply in turn.

"All right, Danny, we'll buy one."

By now the second manned expedition had been to Mars and returned home. Venturer Two had found no new clusters of Windows, nor anything else to set the Earth on fire. True, they hadn't been over the whole of Mars with a fine toothed comb, yet maybe there was nothing more to discover on our brother planet beyond rocks and grit and wasteland. Perhaps there would one day be a permanent human base on Mars. And perhaps not.

"Where shall we put it, Dad?"

"By the patio. We'll kick those woody roses out of their bed. But let's stick with the resulting triad, eh? Let's not divide it."

"Then you can't see the views from *inside*."

"Oh yes you can. Try climbing a ladder."

Scientific studies of Windows had been unrevealing, to say the least. We knew nothing about their internal structure while they were whole and showing a view. On the other hand they could be crushed or melted—which destroyed that structure—and their chemistry analyzed. Windows were mostly silicon, plus other common elements. Evidently they were able to transmute raw material into the compounds they needed, in the right proportions. Which made them extremely remarkable objects; so remarkable that science was baffled.

Up to the time that Ruth died, I'd been a designer for a home furnishings manufacturer. (Ruth was killed by a truck which jack-knifed across the pavement she was walking along.)

I started out in kitchens then moved into bathrooms. It was I who designed the Whale-of-a-Bath, in the shape of a sperm whale (though smaller!). And the crocodile bath, and the hippo bath. Not to mention the nymph's grotto shower-cubicle. After Ruth's death, with Danny to bring up, I free-lanced from home. I designed totem-taps with animal heads—or with human heads, such as Hitler's or Yoko Ono's. I designed toilets in the form of animals with gaping mouths; you sat on the lips, and afterwards shut the tongue. I designed wash basins with holographic nudes capering in the bowl. These all proved rather fashionable with people who had too much money. Why had no one thought of these styles before? Because no one had needed them—until I designed them. I could always be relied on to come up with a fresh capricious oddity.

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Some day a book might be devoted to my weird designs. If I were writing the preface I'd suggest that as a designer I was anticipating something which hadn't yet occurred: namely the exploitation of genetically engineered animal flesh and fur to serve human comfort—beds which massaged and warmed you, chairs that adjusted to your shape, toilets that ate your waste.

Perhaps I felt so ambiguous about Windows because I suspected that somehow they must be exploiting *us*. Plus the fact that they designed themselves.

One side of our new Window showed—by day—a street market which was bustling and obviously Arab; and by night a mostly deserted street. The backside view was of a changeless golden desert. The sun moved ever so slowly across the sky; the day might last a year.

We held a "Window warming" party.

Amidst our other guests Danny invited his first ever girlfriend, Thea—short for Dorothea—who was a plump, abrasive sixteen-year-old with red hair. I invited my own more sophisticated lady friend of the moment, Denise. Denise was thirty, an ash-blonde divorcée with a snub nose, neat figure, and ironic teasing eyes. She and I had been to bed a total of three times in as many months. Twice, she had been sweet. Once, she had been savage. Denise radiated several frequencies of empathy and friendliness, along with another wavelength which I didn't trust at all: a sort of slyly destructive, ego-puncturing, selfish cruelty. During a deeper prolonged relationship I guessed that this latter might well tune out the nicer frequencies. Right now, though, it still added a sparkle of danger which I found stimulating. She kept me on my toes. (If I married her, she might dance me to death in red-hot shoes.)

The centerpiece of the party wasn't really the new Window. People had seen plenty of Windows in the past ten years. The centerpiece was one of the Mars astronauts from the second expedition, Donna-Jean Scott, geology specialist.

D-J was a petite black woman from New Orleans, who was fast becoming rich on account of TV fees, book serial rights, consultancies and product endorsements. On board Venturer Two there had been a crew of seven men and four women. One of D-J's media coups had been when she revealed how this ratio was arrived at—by a Californian psychologist-astrologer who ran a Center for Emotional Numerology.

I had inveigled her to the party through Sam Jakobs, London boss of a multinational for whom I'd designed a personalized bestial bathroom. D-J was currently promoting a new Antarctic tourist resort which Sam's outfit had just opened as a sideline. Antarctica and Mars were much alike in a couple of respects. Both were barren and bloody cold. Need I

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say that black skin showed up excellently against white ice; or that if filmed through red filters snow-fields looked just like Martian dunes ought to look?

My motives in luring Donna-Jean Scott to the party were several. One: to please Danny, and enhance him in the eyes of Thea. Two: to control Thea's adolescent brashness—someone of D-J's stature (or rather, fame) ought to abash and stem any uncouth rudeness. Three: to signal to Denise that I could swing celebrities. Last but not least: having eventually succumbed to Window ownership I wanted a warranty, a reassurance.

It was a sunny evening. A barbecue sizzled, busy broiling kebabs and bratwurst. A lute player in medieval costume—nice touch, this—sang ballads. A couple of hired waiters circulated bearing glasses of chilled Hock and warmer Burgundy. D-J obligingly admired the busy Arab market, then the alien desert.

"Is that Mars?" Thea asked her, jerking a thumb at the sands.

"No, Honey, it's the wrong color."

"Maybe it's a bit of Mars you missed," said Denise. "It was just over the next dune, but your boots were full of sand so you hiked back to the ship."

"We rode buggies," D-J corrected her. "And if you have sand in your boots you're already dead."

"How nice, if there were pyramids and camels," Denise continued idly. "How boring Mars must be. Apart from the Windows."

Thus rubbing home the point that the Windows had been discovered by the first expedition?

"Boredom, honey, is in a person's soul. And on a place like Mars, boredom *kills*."

"Is it as bad as that?" Denise sounded innocent.

"What I mean is: if you don't pay attention *all* of the time—"

I intervened. "Donna-Jean, you visited the site of the first Windows, right?"

"We paid a call. There were still six triads, same as ever. You'll recall how the first team shipped two triads home intact. But first they dismantled one, which grew two replacements. Look, this Window of yours is budding already."

So it was.

"Could the Earth ever fill up chock full of Windows?" asked Thea.

D-J laughed. "Not while human consumers are involved. No way. There has to be a natural saturation level, same as for any other product. You ought to regard this kind of craze ecologically. A niche fills up after a while, same as in nature. Demand tails off."

Danny spoke up. "Do you suppose aliens could be watching *us* through the Windows? And that's their real purpose?"

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"I'd doubt that, Daniel. How would the information get to these aliens?"

"By faster than light particles—which we can't detect."

"And which no one has ever proved to exist." D-J shook her head and raised her glass of burgundy. "Here's to your new Window and its twin offspring. May those show something really neat."

"Windows are just like fruit machines," remarked Denise. "Don't you think? We keep on playing and playing in the hope we'll hit a jackpot."

An image popped into my mind of toilets designed like fruit machines, with a flush handle to operate them. What had old Freud said about money? That money was like feces? That hoarding cash—amassing wealth—was a harking back to infantile anal retention?

If I designed fruit machine toilets these might have a deep subconscious appeal to wealthy purchasers. . . .

Or would my patrons feel haunted by an inexplicable fear of bankruptcy and develop constipation?

The idea needed thinking through.

It took a week for Window number two to grow. As soon as it reached full size the views appeared. One was of a glacier which might have been on Earth or on a planet half way across the galaxy. No way to tell; sun and moon looked much the same. The other was of a savannah which certainly wasn't on Earth. Its grass was grazed by stilt-like creatures resembling grey flamingos with the heads of gazelles. Occasionally the creatures all raced away, perhaps to escape some slinking predator; or maybe they just raced for exercise.

Danny spent a good while staring at these views as though he personally owned that savannah and the glacier.

"Two cherries," was what Denise said to me when she called round.

"Hmm?"

"Two cherries on the fruit machine. Lowest pay-off." She put an arm around my waist and hugged me lovingly. Perhaps for exercise.

By now I'd decided in one part of me that most of my creative life had been spent uselessly and farcically—even though another part of me was still busy churning out fresh ideas, such as fruit machine toilets.

Windows seemed to offer a perverse reflection of my own activities. Endlessly they generated fresh perspectives upon far-out places . . . which weren't really worth visiting. Even if we could reach them; which we couldn't.

The only really attractive views were those of Earth.

Was this the true purpose of Windows? To disenchant us? To serve up a superfluity of empty alien scenes—plus a percentage of earthly sights, where at least something worthwhile was happening?

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Could Windows be a compassionate, if enigmatic legacy from some superior alien culture which had been on the point of tossing in the towel, or perhaps emigrating to the next galaxy, or achieving nirvana? Aimed to tip us the wink so that we shouldn't waste our time in futile pursuits?

I believed myself to be somewhat of a trend-setter in styles. Was this mood of mine one which would presently infect the whole Earth, as Windows multiplied and always showed us meaningless places?

Ah. But let us consider the malicious conspiracy explanation. Could Windows have been planted on Mars so that we would find them and lose heart? In actuality the universe was full of faery worlds and wonders, revels and adventures, cities and spires. But after a million Windows we'd never believe it.

Perhaps I was simply growing old. Danny appeared to prefer the empty alien scenes to those of the Arab market. The former seemed to appeal to him more. And to Thea, likewise. Maybe that was because they pictured as landscape the essential emptiness of adolescence, the kind of hormonal elegiac sadness which causes bad poetry to be written.

Our second window began growing a third to complete the triad.

The final Window switched its view on during an afternoon while I was alone at home. I stepped out on to the patio to inspect.

And I was looking upon a windswept moonlit tundra. A quartet of little moons scattered light. A bright constellation dominated the sky. I immediately thought of it as "the Ape." The Ape was scratching for fleas, of lesser stars. Maybe our own sun was one of its fleas; probably not.

How charmingly bizarre, on a sunny afternoon, to stand gazing into alien night. Oh yes, how charming. Here was a window upon my own darkness.

Though if that tundra's sun rose after our own sun had set, how illuminating this view would be! We needn't use our electric patio lantern any more at night. We would save a few pennies courtesy of an alien star.

When Danny arrived home half an hour later, with Thea in tow, they really admired the moonlit tundra and the grinning itchy ape presiding overhead, bandy-legged, arms tucked in armpits.

Then Danny asked me, "What's on the inside?"

"Yes, what does the other side show?" demanded Thea.

I shrugged.

"You haven't *looked*, Dad?"

"I thought I'd leave it," I lied, "for you two."

From our outhouse Danny fetched a tall pair of steps.

"Bring a ladder too," urged Thea. "I want to climb down inside. We can both climb down inside, Dan."

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A ladder, plus two bodies, crammed into the triangle between three surfaces the size of doors?

"That'll be a tight squeeze," I said.

"It'll be *fun*. It won't seem cramped," she insisted.

"That's up to you."

So Danny went to fetch our light aluminum ladder.

Would they kiss and stroke each other, there in the space between three worlds?

I had just visualized—and rejected—the notion of adapting a triad of Windows into a shower cabinet. For who would want to enter or leave a shower by way of a ladder?

This led on to the thought that to date no one had actually tried to incorporate Windows into houses. Well, you could hardly stick one in a window-frame in place of plain glass; not when one sprouted three. But maybe there was some domestic use for Windows?

Or would this be on the same level as turning elephants' feet into umbrella stands?

Fashion articles and décor manufactured from dead animals—zebras, crocodiles, tigers—were definitely *out*. Disapproved of. Yet the ancient desire of the human hunter to decorate his cave with trophies had to find some outlet. Thus my success with bestial baths and toilets (made of plastic).

It was at this point that I heard the familiar triumphal growl of arrival of Denise's Turbo. After pulling up at the end of a journey Denise always raced the engine fiercely once before switching off. As though the car was a child with a cold and she was officiously blowing its nose for it.

I let her in and without enquiring fixed her a customary Campari and soda, and myself a Scotch. Out of the corner of my eye, through the open French windows, I noticed Danny squirming around on top of the steps. Our ladder jutted out from inside the triad. A red head was disappearing from sight.

Why did people drink Campari? It tasted like dentifrice to me. The proper place for Campari and soda, in my opinion, was in a dentist's surgery as a medicated mouth-rinse (alcoholic, to calm the nerves).

Denise and I clinked glasses.

"Cheers."

"*Salute.*"

I was definitely sinking into a deep depression—just as Danny was descending into a tight wedge of alien worlds. Everything seemed fouled and worthless.

Perhaps the ultimately depressing feature was the impossibility of actually stepping through any of those Windows—even if the destinations

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weren't worth visiting. Thus they were a double taunt. Suddenly I hated Windows, though perhaps it was only myself I was hating.

A scream cut the afternoon like a knife slicing flesh.

I ran outside, pursued by Denise. That had *not* been the kind of squeal caused by standing on someone's toes.

"Danny!" I cried.

"Thea!" shouted Denise. She must have noticed red hair vanish too. But why had she called Thea's name? Was that because I had neglected to? No doubt!

Danny was scrambling out of the top of the triad, on to the steps. "Dad! Help, Dad!" He nearly knocked the damn steps over. I grabbed and steadied them.

"Is Thea all right in there?"

"She's gone, Dad. *Gone.* There was a flash of light—and a kind of rushing wind—and . . . She's beyond the Windows! She's on the other side."

"Get down the steps! Let me up!"

Quickly Danny descended and I climbed to the top. I leaned inside to look.

The golden desert: Thea stood staring about her in horror. She was breathing—she hadn't fallen, poisoned or insensible. She began to wave aimlessly in one direction then another. She couldn't see me; or see any window. The sun beat down.

The savannah: Thea was also standing there, thigh-deep in grass. Some of those flamingo-gazelles were bounding away in the distance. She gazed around, white with shock, rooted to the spot.

The third window . . .

Thea again. She was *in a city.* A city not of Earth. Columns of many-colored lozenges soared upward, pierced by black spires, toward a cloudy grey sky. Perhaps the lozenges were fastened to the spires, the way a lupin flowers. She was standing by a broad, brown street. Opaque bubble-vehicles rolled along on squashy tires. Creatures were approaching her, and she was screaming. The creatures were upright grey tubes—eyes and other organs at the top—with tiny waddly legs and thin whiplike arms. Walking worms, that wore sashes and boxes and clusters of small silver balls.

This was the alien jackpot.

The pay-off was instant transportation to that alien city.

And to the desert. And to the savannah.

A jackpot of horror.

How could Thea be in that city, and also in two other places?

I wrenched at the Windows. To see more clearly and easily? To bring Thea back; to rescue her?

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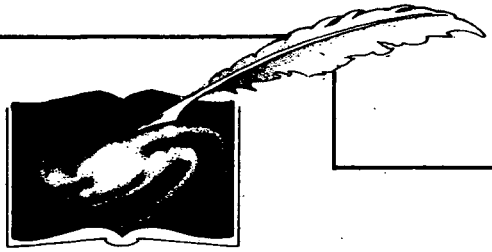

About L. RON HUBBARD's

Writers of the Future Contest

by Algis Budrys

The Writers of the Future contest substantially rewards at least twelve talented new speculative fiction writers each year. With no strings, every three months it confers prizes of $500, $750 and $1,000 for short stories or novelettes. In addition, there's an annual Master Prize of $4,000. All awards are symbolized by trophies or framed certificates, so there's something for the mantelpiece too.

There's also a Writers of the Future anthology, which I edit. (There was one last year, and there's another one just out as you read this.) It offers top rates for limited rights in the stories. These payments are in addition to any contest winnings. The anthology is distributed through top paperback book retailers everywhere, and is kept in print and on sale continually. All that's required to win or to be a finalist is a good new story, any kind of fantasy or science fiction, no more than 17,000 words long, by writers whose published fiction has been no more than three short stories or one novelette. Entry is free.

The contest deadlines in 1986 are March 31, June 30, and September 30, and there are First, Second and Third prizes for each three-month quarter. At the end of our year, a separate panel of judges awards a Master Prize to the best of the four quarterly winners. So one person will win a total of $5,000. Judging panels include or have included Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, C.L. Moore, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny, as well as me. Matters are administered so that the judges are totally independent and have the final say.

It seems hardly necessary to embellish the above facts with any enthusiastic adjectives. This contest was created and sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard and the project will continue in 1986 and try to do some realistic good for people whose talent earns them this consideration. For complete entry rules, and answers to any questions you might have, write to the address given below:

Don't Delay! Send Your Entry To:

Writers of the Future Contest
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Or, you can find the rules—and examples of winning stories, plus informative essays by some of the judges—in either of the Writers of the Future anthologies. They're original paperbacks and cost $3.95 each.

Good luck.

—Algis Budrys

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The Windows snapped apart. The triad became three separate Windows, leaning together.

I backed quickly down the steps, disposed of those on the lawn, and manhandled the Windows to stand separately so that we could all see Thea, three times over. And the city, with its inhabitants.

"Why did you do—?" Denise gasped.

"*Aliens*," I said.

Danny pawed the savannah Window as though he could follow Thea through. He couldn't.

"How is she in three places?" Denise asked me numbly.

In the desert, she was beginning to trudge up a dune.

In the savannah, she was stamping down the grass as though to make a nest for herself, a safe place.

In the city, the aliens were forming a discreet and curious circle around her. Their whip-arms pointed at her, waggling and wavering.

"Windows multiply themselves," said Denise, "and they multiplied her too. . . . Is one of those the *real* Thea? Are the others only images? She looks real in all three."

"Doesn't she?" I agreed. "But where's she going to go in a desert? Or in a savannah? She might find food and drink in the savannah . . . but the desert. My God."

In the city she had stopped screaming. She was shaking as she faced the aliens.

"You broke the triad," Danny accused me. "You smashed it, Dad. Now she's stuck on the other side. She can't get back!"

"I didn't break anything. We have to be able to see! What makes you think she could get back?"

"I might have been able to follow her—to be with her."

"In that desert, where you'd die?"

"So that's the score," Denise said quietly. "You didn't want to lose your son. You bastard."

"I . . . That isn't why. How would you be able to follow her, Danny?"

"Not now, he can't," said Denise. "You tampered."

The aliens were opening a gap in their ranks. A larger bubble-car had stopped nearby. Thea was herded by waving arms towards the transport.

Danny took a deep breath, shut his eyes, and threw himself at the city Window; as though with eyes closed tight he might pass through.

His whole weight crashed against the Window. The Window toppled over. It fell upon the steel edge of the barbecue, with Danny sprawling after.

The Window cracked across. The view vanished.

In the desert—and in the savannah too—Thea jerked around as if she had heard a sudden explosion, or had felt something twang and snap.

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For a while she searched about in puzzlement. Then in the savannah she gave up and continued stamping grass. In the desert she resumed her climb up the golden dune.

The city was gone, the broken Window blank.

"You utter fool," I said to Danny, as I helped him up.

"Fool? Fool?" He shook himself free.

"You've lost the city."

"Lost *her*, you mean."

"Yes, yes. I'm so sorry . . . that you broke the Window. If I hadn't separated them you wouldn't have been able to break it."

Looking at the expression on Danny's face I felt the same cold, hollow suction that I'd felt when Ruth was killed. A feeling as if I was being emptied out. I feared that I'd lost my son, after all.

Also, we'd blunderingly lost the alien city, jackpot of millions of Windows. No one else but us three had seen it. Us four, if you counted Thea. How could I count her? She was no longer on the Earth.

Yet of course I *could* count her.

Thea One, there in the desert, disappearing over the dune crest in search of water, life.

Thea Two, on the savannah, also getting under way. I realized now why she had been trampling the grass. That was to mark the spot where she had arrived, so that she could locate the place again. How long would it take the grass to right itself?

Did each Thea think that she was the only one? She must.

What kind of mad transportation system was it which gave rise to two extra, doomed copies of the traveler?

Never before had Windows transported anything other than views. And likewise, never after? This once, a Window had transported a person. And we had broken the Window.

"Danny! What was it that triggered the Window? What did you two do in there?"

He stared at me bitterly.

"Did you kiss? Did you do more than that?" I spoke with urgency. "Did you—?"

"You're being crass," Denise told me.

"I'm trying to work out how it happened."

"She's going to die," said Danny.

"They might treat her well in the city," I said. "They might even know a way to return her."

"Through a broken Window?" asked Denise.

"What about the other Theas?" my son asked.

"Maybe those are phantom images. How can a person become three persons?"

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"I thought God once managed that trick," said Denise. "The holy trinity, hmm?"

I smiled. I said, "We'll have to report what just happened."

"Why should anyone believe us?" she countered.

"We have to, because poor Thea has disappeared. Gone missing. And also because we've just glimpsed an alien civilization—which Windows can transport us to!"

"Where's our proof?"

"If we all swear blind—"

Denise nodded at the two surviving Windows. "The rest of the evidence is busy walking away."

"She'll surely come back when she can't find—"

"I wouldn't," said Danny. "I'd carry on walking."

I groaned. If only I'd thought to rush and bring a camera. Too late now. Thea had disappeared over the dune. In the savannah, in the distance half hidden by grass, she might have been any kind of creature.

Danny began to cry. And then he started to curse. Denise made a fine show of consoling. However, Danny wouldn't let me even try to console him.

"Listen," I broke in at last. "She has disappeared, damn it all! We can't pretend that Thea walked out of the house, and maybe somebody kidnapped her. We have to tell her parents the truth. We have to explain to the police. We have to be honest!"

All of which was perfectly true, as Danny and Denise were forced to acknowledge, by and by.

Accordingly we confessed; though not to any crime. Parents came. Police came. Government scientists came, and took the broken Window away for tests, along with the other two Windows. News reporters and camera teams arrived; and went.

In their wake, a couple of days later, came Donna-Jean Scott; and for a few confused moments I thought she had flown in specially from Mars.

"Honey," she said to me on the Windowless patio, "I'm heartbroken for you. I had to come, because in a sense I blessed your Window. Will you tell me every little bitty detail of what went on?"

I knew then that this was no private visit. Nevertheless, to her I told every last nuance of the incident; including my failure to call out Thea's name. Maybe a woman from Mars might understand my feelings of separation. I'd certainly lost Denise, which perhaps was no disaster. But I'd also lost Danny, though he still lived in the house.

"I might be tempted," said D-J, "to speculate that a heightened state of consciousness—erotic, right?—can trigger a Window—"

"Danny got out fast," I interrupted, "and he was fully dressed."

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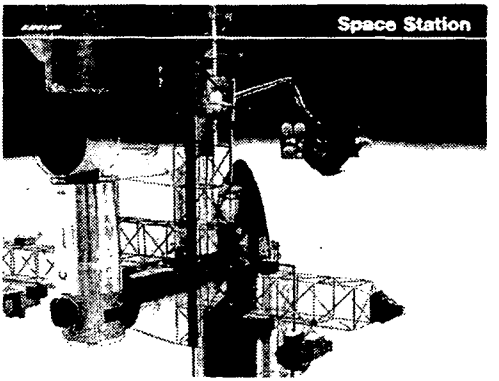

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"Even so. That doesn't prevent excitement. But the fact is, the alien city was already showing when the pair of them climbed down inside. It was, wasn't it?"

"The tundra was showing on the outside."

"Are you positive the worm city was on view beforehand, *inside*? This is kind of important. If not, maybe the kids' excitement triggered *that*, as well as transporting Thea."

"Danny has been a bit reticent with me, as I've told you. Those investigators asked enough questions."

"I know. And no one challenged that particular assumption. Because everything happened in a flash. I'd like to speak to Danny, if I may?"

"Go ahead. He respects you. He's upstairs, brooding."

D-J descended from Danny's room twenty minutes later.

"The ladder was facing the savannah," she reported. "So that's all he saw, as he climbed down. He admits to feeling sexually aroused, as well as filled with a spirit of venture. Thea was just busy turning round. They were jammed together. Danny was still on the bottom rung. He fondled her ass, and there was a flash. She screamed. He looked; he saw the city. Next there came that rushing sensation. And she vanished into the Windows."

"If Danny had stepped off the ladder, I could have lost him too?"

"Possibly. I'd say what we have here is a repeatable experiment."

"How do you work that out? The Window's broken."

"Take another newly formed triad. Don't sneak a look at the final view—the one you won't have seen. Don't dangle mirrors. Climb down inside with someone who excites you. Caress, and turn round. The alien city might flash on, and grab you. Or maybe a different civilized destination."

"Plus two others where you could wander till you die. What sort of transport system is that? It's crazy."

"It's one that operates. It delivers. I don't think Windows are preprogrammed with zillions of views. I think each new Window locks in on a view at random by some kind of action-at-a-distance. And it's always a view of a planet or moon, isn't it? Never mere empty space. A mind in a heightened state might direct the random search to a world where there are also thinking beings."

"Plus two other worlds. Who would take part in an experiment like that?"

"I would. I've already visited Mars. I'd kind of like to visit another star system—no matter what the outcome. I guess you need a partner with a hefty emotional charge in them. Preferably one who also has a fierce emotional link with Windows."

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"Danny?"

"You, my friend. I read you. You're charged with guilt and self-contempt and loneliness and lust."

"Don't flatter me so much, Donna-Jean."

She grinned. "When you're cooped up with ten other guys in a tin can for two years you get good at reading people's hearts, and accepting what's in them with love. Otherwise none of you survive."

"What you're proposing doesn't sound like much of a strategy for survival."

"There's a time to survive, and a time to make sacrifices. And to take risks. A time under heaven. How are you going to carry on facing Danny's contempt and anger if you don't try to follow his girl?"

"And two years in a tin can makes you an expert at pushing the right emotional buttons?"

"Could be."

"Where would this experiment of yours be staged?"

"Why not Sam Jakobs' place? He's going on a business trip. We'll install a new Window and let it grow."

"We?"

"Me and some acquaintances. I'd like your son to be there."

"So he can watch me head off into an alien wilderness?"

"So he can admire his old man once again."

The night before the experiment was scheduled, Donna-Jean came round to my place for an intimate dinner. She almost seduced me; but didn't. Danny was away for the night, by arrangement, already at Sam Jakobs'. Deliberately D-J took me up to a peak of desire and abandoned me there, frustrated. She showed me herself and denied me herself. Had I been a caveman, I would have reached for my club. But we aren't cavemen, are we?

"This is naked exploitation," I complained, with an effort at wit. (She was mostly naked at the time.) "You're exploiting yourself shamelessly."

"Now who's exploiting who, Honey?" she purred.

"You're exploiting me. Your bosses are exploiting you."

"I'm increasing your charge, darling; should that be what's needed. *You* should complain about exploitation, with your nymph showers and nude basins and your bestial baths."

"I plead guilty," I groaned.

"Just you increase that charge of guilt, too."

"You're a remarkable lady, Ms. Geology Specialist. I think I'm falling in love with you."

"No, you ain't. But feel free to imagine it."

It took me a long while to get to sleep that night (alone).

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The newly completed triad was planted in a small rear garden of tubbed shrubs with high brick walls around it, not totally dissimilar to my own patch of patio and lawn at home. My very own pair of steps was set up adjacent to the triad, with the same aluminum ladder at hand—no expenses spared. D-J's fellow specialists had hung video-cameras overhead to record the scene inside the triad and the view from the final Window upon tape. As yet no one knew what, if anything, that sixth Window showed. Nobody was kibbitzing just in case the consciousness of the observer should interfere with the functioning of the Window prematurely; hence the video recorders, left unmonitored.

The outer views were of an alien swamp infested with creepy-crawlies; a yellow, surf-lashed beach backed by coconut palms; and a plain of bubbling mud.

I'd been shown videos of the first two inner views. I'd seen an alien forest with rutted barrel-trees sprouting enormous parasol leaves and dangling yellow fruit, the ground covered with velvety purple fuzz. I'd also viewed a sloping rocky terrain with a few stiff growths reminiscent of stag's-horn coral.

D-J's colleagues were maintaining a low profile indoors, so as to keep out of our hair; and Danny was with them.

Both inner landscapes looked survivable, for at least a while. Presumably if one of those views had been of an airless moon or of molten lava we mightn't have pursued the experiment.

Which commenced with my telling Danny, inside the house, "I'm going to search for Thea, son," then my stepping outside, to be deeply kissed by Donna-Jean. D-J and I were both kitted out in stout boots, tough trousers and hooded weatherproof jackets incorporating numerous pockets crammed with survival essentials, even including little high-powered radios and a pistol each. We both wore Reactolite sun glasses. All courtesy of D-J's team. This was equipment left over from the returning Mars-ship—in case Venturer Two had come down in the Amazon or Arctic. I felt ludicrous to be standing in that little city garden dressed this way.

"Okay, let's go. Catch me if you can." D-J climbed. I followed up and pushed the ladder high so that she could maneuver it over and slide it down.

She took care not even to glance at the view which was as yet unrevealed, both while she settled the ladder firmly and while she clambered down inside. We'd agreed that we should face the barrel forest—until the moment when I caressed her and we both turned round.

"Come on in," she called up softly. "Water's fine."

So I started down the ladder. Five rungs more to the bottom. Four.

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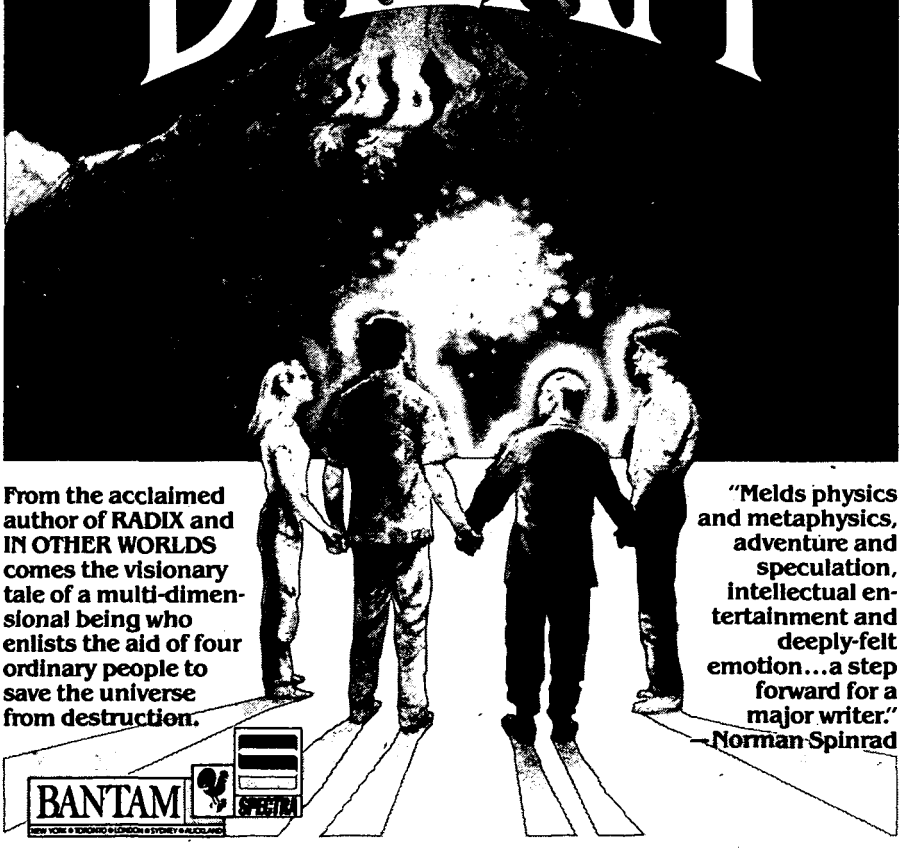

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Three. By now I was squashing against her. Her breasts pressed my thighs, my back. Two.

One foot on the soil now. The soil of Earth: the human humus.

"Okay," I said.

"Both feet, Buster."

"Both," I confirmed.

"Let go the ladder. We're going to both turn round together, and you're going to fondle me."

Here we were, two fancy-dress-ball explorers stuck in a tight glass elevator . . . the situation was absurd, but damn it I felt excited.

"On the count of six. If you know some Latin, that's English for *sex*."

"Oh very droll."

"One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Sex."

We both squirmed round together, and I placed my hands on her jacket over her breasts.

The "target" Window was blank—for only a moment. Suddenly it flashed, and the view was. . . .

To our surprise radio communication through the Windows is no problem at all, just so long as there are radios on both sides.

There are two radios in that rocky terrain.

There are two more radios—*ours*—in the alien forest.

And there are two in the alien civilization where the "successful" Donna-Jean Scott and I arrived. (Plus a spare radio with the team at Sam Jakobs' place.)

We can all chatter to each other, and to those back home on Earth.

Our jubilant twins in the civilization have great tales to tell: of the sparkling city they arrived in, and of its saurian-descended inhabitants who haven't torn them to pieces but who have proved hospitable and brightly curious. Those two are already learning how to talk to the natives.

Our other twins are slogging down an endless rocky slope, hoping against hope to find somewhere less stark. At least it's cool there, though they're being burnt by the naked rays of a white sun.

And us? We've been hiking through these barrel-trees for a couple of days now, wondering how soon we should drink from a stream or test the fruit or even shoot one of the miniature dappled "bears" to try the meat.

It's odd talking to your own self on the radio and hearing your own self answer.

"Hullo, Donna on the rocks," says my Dee-Jay. "Hey Honey, you're the Madonna of the rocks!"

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"At least it's better than Mars," comes the parched reply. "Not much. A bit. And it's downhill all the way."

"We're going to test a barrel-pear tomorrow morning. One of us. Doesn't matter which. If one of us gets poisoned, the other one's days are numbered too."

"We can eat the food here," calls D-Jean from the saurian city.

"Some folks have all the luck," remarks my Dee-Jay.

I don't talk to my own twins very much. Can't stand the sound of my own voice.

It's evening under the parasols. The purple fuzz is soft beneath our feet. Time to bed down for the night. We'll build a camp fire of barrel-tree bark and branches, though we haven't seen any sign of predators. There ought to be some predators, otherwise the mini-bears would overrun the forest. But perhaps the mini-bears aren't too hot at breeding.

"Call a halt here, Dee-Jay?"

"Yep. Over and out, Earth and elsewhere. We're gonna gather kindling."

Later, as we sit in the dark by our camp fire listening to assorted distant croaks and twitters—none of them notably menacing—the radio beeps.

"This is Earth. You guys all listening?"

Dee-Jay and her twins acknowledge.

"On account of this radio business we've figured that Windows must be some kind of transmitter device after all. They're a type of galactic phone directory. Something's obviously screwy about the way we've been using it—I mean, multiplying millions of the things. Also, the idea must be to transmit equipment, not personnel. Because of the tripling factor, right? There has to be a way to trigger a sending without sending people in the process. We're really going to work on this. Maybe if we could somehow send a Window *through* a Window, we'd have us a two-way door. Don't know as yet how we could fit a Window inside of a triad . . . but if you guys can hang in there long enough there's a chance we could haul you out."

"Haul three copies of us out?" enquires Donna of the Rocks.

"Yeah, there's that to consider too. Maybe you'd all three fuse back together again. Maybe three copies are meant to be routed variously and fused at destination—as a checking system—in case of signal loss."

"Personally I'm in no wild hurry," chips in my twin from Saurian City. "I want to see if I can interest our hosts in some new home designs. I appreciate that it's difficult for D-Jean and myself in that stony place—"

"You ain't kidding," says that other Donna. "Four or five days, and we've had it. Unless a miracle occurs."

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"And here in the forest," says my Dee-Jay, "we just don't know. If we can live off the land without poisoning ourselves, I guess we could last out."

I hear the voice of my twin with incredulity. He's me—yet he isn't me. I find it hard to accept that I exist elsewhere and that the elsewhere-person is myself. Or that he's sure he's the real me. Which, of course, he is. If Windows can make copies of people, are people no more than complicated biological machines? Perhaps! It's futile to pursue this line of thought.

Yet curiously it isn't futility which I feel right now—though I'll accept that my twin on that stony slope may be feeling terminally futile. Sitting here in the firelight under the alien trees I feel oddly content at last. At last I've arrived somewhere, even if I don't know where it is. I have even found a true friend.

I put my arm around Dee-Jay and she nestles against me.

"Goodnight, Earth." I thumb the radio off. "Let's make love," I suggest.

"Yes," she agrees.

Today we reach the edge of the barrel-forest. We have eaten alien pears and not fallen sick. Ahead, across a shallow river, stretches a blue pasture land with scattered groves of umbrella-trees. And there's a crude village or encampment. With dappled dwellers who have two legs and two arms and knobbly, tufted heads. We watch them through our binoculars.

"They look fairly primitive," murmurs Dee-Jay.

"Maybe they weren't so primitive once. And maybe a lot of Windows have wandered off focus since they were first designed a million years ago, or whenever. Or maybe climates have changed. Forests have grown. Deserts have shifted. Mountains have heaved up. Maybe Windows can be drifted across a landscape to a good destination, if only we knew how."

"A million years ago those villagers might still have been animals."

"They might have some more sophisticated cousins a thousand miles from here."

"Compared with animals, they look sophisticated. What do we have to lose? Let's try them."

"We have ourselves to lose, Dee-Jay. Though really I don't feel lost at all. Not any more."

So we paddle then wade across the river. ●

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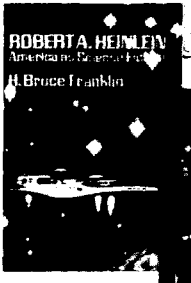

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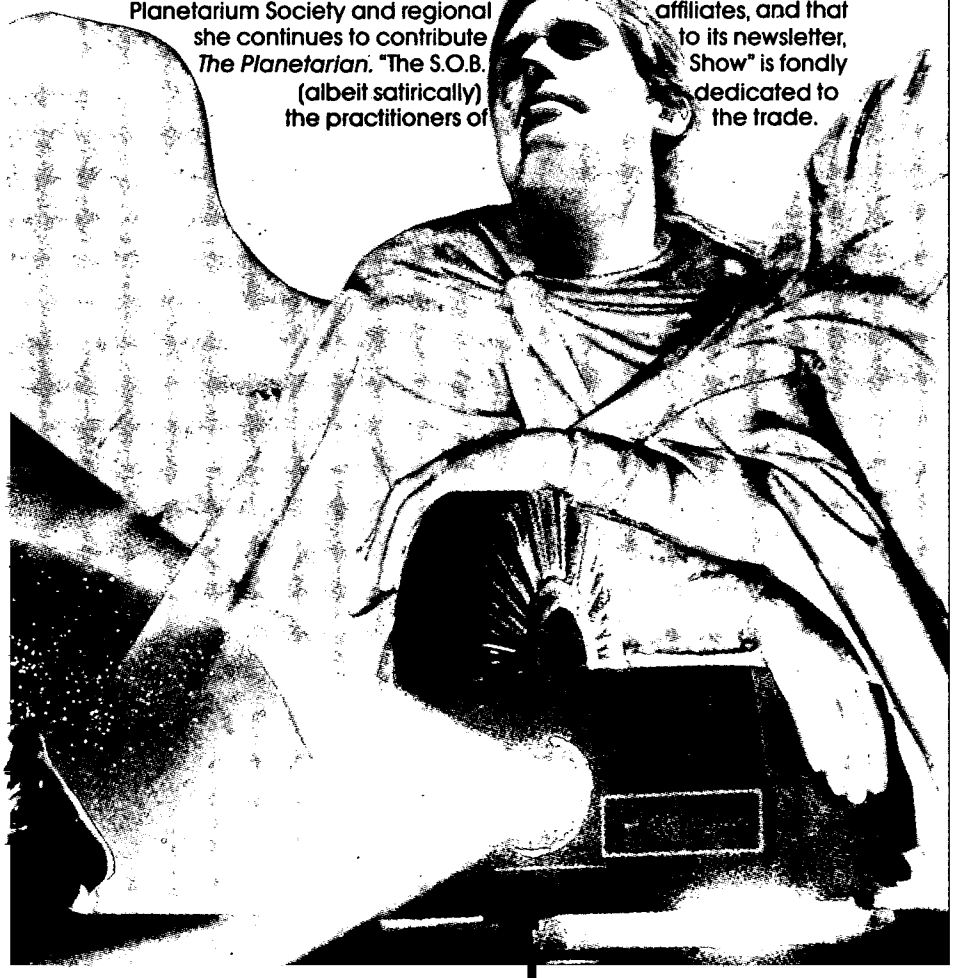
THE S.O.B. SHOW

by Elissa Malcohn

art: J.K. Potter

The author tells us she was active for several years in the planetarium field, including the International Planetarium Society and regional affiliates, and that she continues to contribute to its newsletter, *The Planetarian*. "The S.O.B. Show" is fondly (albeit satirically) dedicated to the practitioners of the trade.



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I asked a technician where the Taurus Incident was. He told me to go past the laser display and inflatable domes, turn left, take a flight of stairs to some hole in the ground that looked like a dungeon, and swing a sharp right smack dab into red velvet. Then I'd see the brass plaque that read Corncob Lounge.

"You joining me?" I asked.

No; he was giving a kiddie show in one of the inflatable domes. He had to go inflate it. Then he had to stay sober.

Zircon Planetarium was hosting its first regional meeting, and we fell on the neighborhood Hilton with an arsenal of gizmos and gadgetry and an eye out for bars. A Taurus Incident is a Bull Session. And Zircon Planetarium was providing us with more good bull than we'd had in a *long* time.

Edmund Cass III was one reason, Bauersfeld Automation was another. One day Bauersfeld and Cass had come together in a meeting of like minds and fat purses; and before long Cass was spouting as to how he had the best planetarium automation system in the *world*. Two hundred slide projectors in synchronous operation. Each projector fed into a pre-programmed show in tandem with a laser simulation. Who needed a star ball?

Star balls are those things that stand in the middle of planetariums and look like Grade-B movie insects. Stand them up on struts, raise the struts on a pedestal, wire it all in with your special effects projectors and hope to God you remembered to pay the electric bill.

With his new toys Edmund Cass III could toss his star balls out the door (or better yet, *sell* 'em!). "What'll it be? You want me to do it with slides I'll do it with slides. I can cover the dome with a night sky and it'll all come from slide projectors. Press a button and POOF! the projectors advance and you've got a new sky. Do it fast and you get motion. Or what about the laser? I can plug in a program to take you out to Alpha Centauri; the Sun will be in Orion . . ."

There was a good reason why Cass hired outside narrators to pre-record his shows. Cass sounded like a duck. Before he added narrators to his budget all his shows came out Disney. Which is fine for a school program; but when you debunk the Jupiter Effect to an audience armed with natal charts, quoting NASA in the voices of Huey, Dewey, and Louie does not add to your credibility.

It's worse when a duck spouts to you about all his new toys. Most planetariums are lucky if they're only in the red by just so much, never mind breaking even.

But there was a catch.

Bauersfeld Automation was state-of-the-art. State-of-the-art's a real polite way of saying everything is still in the experimental stage. What

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no one figured was that Zircon Planetarium overlooked a major highway. Every time a trucker got on the horn, dropped his handle and sighted a Smokey all the slide projectors spun their trays. You might be halfway to Alpha Centauri in the East, but in the West you'd be standing on top of Machu Picchu.

That was how Edmund Cass III blew his first wad.

He blew his second during a technicians' strike.

Now he was hosting his first planetarium conference, and anyone who ever held a grudge against Edmund Cass was waiting for him to blow his third.

There are worse fates than coordinating a regional convention. One is updating and giving the "Star of Bethlehem" Christmas show. Affectionately known as "the S.O.B. Show," it is the one extravaganza shared by almost every planetarium that needs to draw a crowd in order to stay solvent. There are only so many ways you can ask, "What *was* the Star of Bethlehem *really?*" and proceed to dazzle your audience with comets, bolides, and progressions of planetary alignments. And you get to do this every single year, to uniform sell-out crowds. Most important, at the end of your show you get to repeat time and time again that, gee whiz, maybe the Star of Bethlehem really *was* an angel after all; because your sellout crowd often owes its numbers to a lot of nuns in the audience. *Angry* nuns.

If you're lucky, some astronomer and/or theologian comes up with a new theory. If you're even luckier you get to be the first one to use it in a show, and then you've got your paper topic all set for your next planetarium convention.

Which is why the people tossing down their drinks in the Corncob Lounge giggled and groaned around me at the same time. Edmund Cass was hosting his convention in early December.

Giving the S.O.B. Show is one fate worse than masterminding a con. An even *worse* fate is keeping company for three days with everybody who is doing the same thing.

Between paper sessions I milled around the exhibition rooms. They were high- and low-tech toy stores. Before the con was over, the eclipsing binary projector before me would have its slides of stars substituted with more-than-suggestive human figures moving together and apart and together again. A universe created by a higher power? We know better. The universe is done with mirrors.

Even Abner Jericho looked depressed, and I thought he'd be ecstatic at an overdose of S.O.B. Shows. He stood all alone at a table crammed with lenses and motors and toggle switches. Anyone else standing at that table would be slavering by now, and I was beginning to. Some

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supplier was going out of business and those scraps were prime merchandise. Give me a handful of them and I'll show you miracles. Give Abner a handful of those scraps and he'll show you even better miracles, except the higher power gets all the credit.

I joined him and began to sift through the motors. "Too much for you too, eh?"

"Ah'm afraid so." His hands were thrust into his pants pockets and I wanted to mother him, tell him he shouldn't ruin his posture. "You're the first person to talk to me today."

"Oh boy," I said. So that was it. Jericho had postulated at our last meet that the Virgo Supercluster was the Mind of God. His S.O.B. Shows were attended by *happy* nuns. "That's rotten, Abner. Heck, if anyone can think of a new twist for an old show, you can." Abner Jericho was the best entertainer since Cecil B. De Mille when it came to the Star of Bethlehem, and that skill spilled over into all his other shows. When he spoke on special effects the conference room was packed. "Are you giving a paper this year?"

"Tomorrow morning," he said. He smiled a little. "Ah've got a rotating Io set up with active volcanoes."

I couldn't wait to see how he'd managed that one. Last year Abner demonstrated an aurora borealis made from a plastic garbage bag and dayglo paint. It blew our socks off.

I prayed he wouldn't segue this time from the volcanoes into fire and brimstone. *Please God not this year!*

Edmund Cass III was bustling and bubbling at the Banquet. No snafus so far; and if he kept his exhibitors well fed he stood a chance of getting a ton of electronic freebies before everybody went home. Smatterings of guests were already showing their appreciation, and I wet my finger to join them. In some societies you thank your host by burping after a meal; in ours you play your lead crystal. We turn banquet halls into giant and ill-tuned glass harmonicas.

When Cass wasn't putting on a smile for his guests and a song and dance routine for his sponsors, he put his foot down for his technicians. "Are all the bugs out yet?" he quacked. "I don't want to get *one* call for Smokey, do you hear me?"

I got an image of Smokey the Bear and Donald Duck at loggerheads and almost choked to death on my chocolate mousse.

Pat Tanner shoved his meaty hand between my shoulderblades. "You okay?"

"Okay now. Here, have the rest of this." I passed him the mousse. "Every time I hear Ed spouting off about Smokeys I see a bear and a duck."

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Pat smiled and his eyes glistened with his own pictures. Tanner and his planetarium entered notoriety when he saved his place from bankruptcy. He needed a decent attendance figure for his shows and he wasn't getting it. So one night he sat down with a bag of marijuana and a bottle of Jack Daniels. By morning both were used up and he'd had a soft-porn show called "Big Bang Theories." *That* was nothing new; we expected bad taste from Tanner. What *was* new was that he had invited his local garden club to the preview and then tipped off the press. The resulting tabloids, smeared with quotes from shocked little old ladies in Mamie Eisenhower hats, guaranteed him standing room only for the rest of the year.

After dinner we filed into the Zircon Star Theatre and crowded into the back because the best seats are by the control panels. Unenlightened audiences think the back's the best place to sleep when the lights go out. That's true, too; but those of us who weren't interested in Cass's new toys were wide awake anyway. That's because we'd smuggled in our own, and were waiting for an opportune time to spring them onto the dome and screw up Ed's timing.

When we were all seated, Cass quacked his welcome address and somebody yawned. Someone else cupped his hands in front of his mouth and made submarine noises. Then a technician twiddled the daily motion switch on his panel and the star ball turned, until Zircon's simulated sun went down. Abner Jericho gazed up at the projected heavens, enraptured.

Then a recorded voice echoed, "Do *you* know what the Star of Bethlehem *really* was?" in a God-quality baritone. Half the room yawned. A woman behind me whispered, "Hey, we're acting just like a *real audience!*"

What followed was the usual circus. Someone trained his flashlight pointer on Betelgeuse when Cass pointed at Aldebaran. A panorama of Nazareth came up and someone else's slew projector landed a lunar module by a load of sheep.

Edmund Cass III couldn't take a joke. He was *livid*. "Could you stop it *please?* I need to check my automation!" Finally we felt sorry for the guy and started acting like grownups.

Then all hell broke loose.

First the computer went bonkers. All the screens by Ed's control panels started flashing strings of binary code. Slide projectors spun their trays like whirlygigs. Jesus landed on the Moon. Pontius Pilate began to burn in Io's volcanoes. Bolides crackled their strobe lights over Jerusalem. Not only that, but I thought the center projector was going to dance right off its pedestal and do a *real* impression of a monster-movie insect; it was a good thing we'd all taken the back seats. Daily motion, annual motion,

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and precession twirled the stars above us every which way at speeds guaranteed to unsettle the most ironclad of stomachs.

"Holy Armageddon!!!" No, that wasn't Abner, that was me.

Abner was standing with his arms folded across his chest. Zircon's horizon cutoff was now on the fritz and Abner shimmered with starlight. I felt sick just looking at him. Most everyone else had their heads down between their knees or at least had closed their eyes; but Jericho was actually gazing up at the dome. I'll bet he never had to use Dramamine in his life. I tried to make out his face; I could swear he looked annoyed.

Finally a technician jimmied open the manual override so that it actually *worked,* and the lights came on. Those of us who weren't already green were pretty pale, and squinting besides.

Tanner was doubled over. He clapped Cass on the shoulder. "Good show, Ed. *Real* good." A technician shoved a wastepaper basket under his face as he tossed his dinner.

No one else said a word. We quickly repaired to the Hilton and our rooms. As for Edmund Cass III, he was about to blow a wad on booze for his suite. If he was going to host the most notorious Taurus Incident in the business, it was also going to be the most hospitable one.

Abner Jericho was one of the few people able to deliver his paper the following morning, and even *his* audience was small. Most of us stayed in our rooms and nursed our hangovers. Except for the technicians, who remained stone cold sober all night and worked feverishly behind Zircon's dome; they felt *worse.* Despite all that, someone was still sober enough and in good enough humor to set up a UFO on the planetarium lawn. You could fit an inflatable dome inside it with no problem and the whole set-up seemed portable enough.

I asked, "Whose is that?"

Jericho skimmed his program. "There's no listing."

"I know there's no listing, but someone must have mentioned something at last night's Taurus Incident. Nobody sneaks in a treat like that and keeps his mouth shut about it."

Abner laughed, and said, "Ah daresay there were other things to talk about!"

I walked past the exhibition rooms and out to the planetarium. For the first time since my arrival there was no round-and-round-the-dome sound system huckster blowing out the walls with a Moog-synthesized rendition of the *1812 Overture.* I thanked the heavens for small favors.

A few folks had already gathered around the new arrival. Someone had already looked for a "Next Show At" sign and not found any. We were sure Ed Cass had lucked into one helluva freebie from a new man-

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ufacturer. It just couldn't fit into the exhibition area back at the hotel, that's all.

I rapped my knuckles on the door. No answer.

Pat Tanner said, "Shit, he's probably stuck in his room with a cold compress on his head. Whoever he is."

"Then who put this here overnight?" I asked.

"Dunno."

"Is anyone giving a paper right now?"

"Yeh. Some second grade teacher's talking about how to explain the solar system with golf balls."

"Oh."

I headed back to the Hilton in search of breakfast. Where I saw the angel.

It was one of the best costume jobs I'd ever seen: a tall person to begin with, dressed in a flowing white robe and sandals; and with long albino wings that extended to the floor. I wondered how many pigeons had sacrificed their lives for this spectacle.

The angel was bestowing a benevolent gaze upon a case of breakfast pastries.

I walked up to it. I say "it" because I didn't know if I was talking to a man or a woman. "I'll bet you're one of Abner's creations."

It answered me in a high tenor-low alto voice: "What sayest thou?"

This was my kinda person. Completely in character. "That's classy," I said. "You'll get tired of that fast, though; how about if we stick to the vernacular?"

The angel withdrew a small box that looked like a new kind of slew projector, except for a small screen that flashed designs on its surface. The benevolent face suddenly crinkled and it screeched, "Say *what!*"

I asked, "Huh?"

"Say *what!*"

"Wrong vernacular; here, let me have a look at that." I leaned forward. "What is that?"

"I believe you'd call it a 'translator.' " Now the angel was speaking in an impeccable British accent.

What the hell was Abner trying to pull? I was sure this was one of his ideas. No, maybe it was Pat's; that "say what" bit was not Abner's style *at all.*

I said, "Let's cut the crap for a minute, okay? What planetarium are you from?"

"I'm sorry," it said, "but you cannot see its star from your solar system."

I winced. This must be Cass's idea; hire local talent that doesn't know the lingo and thinks it's being terribly original. "No no no, you try that out in the lobby and you'll get creamed," I said. I took the angel gently

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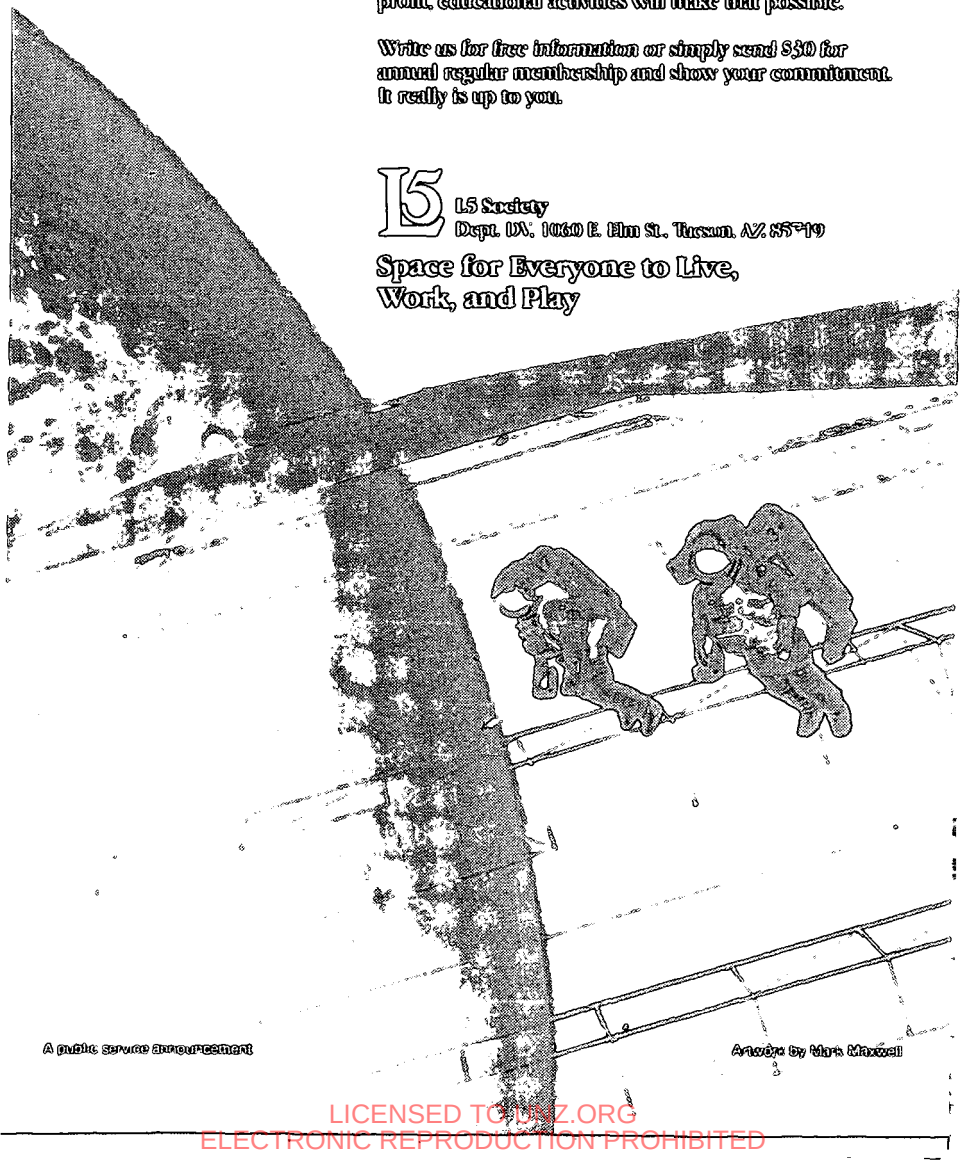

A public service announcement

Artwork by Mark Maxwell

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by its wing and felt warm, soothing down. It must be a furnace in there. "You're not on the program, are you?"

"No. I landed here last night."

I almost laughed. How corny could you get? "You're the one with the spaceship."

It looked reverent, now. Slowly and with grave solemnity, it nodded.

"When's your show?"

"I beg your pardon?"

I was ravenous, and trying to figure this character out wasn't doing much for an already splitting headache. "Uh, look. You'll be sticking around, won't you? I'll see you later." The pastries in front of me made my mouth water. I patted the angel's wing and made my way to a table.

Later I waylaid Abner. "Did you see the angel yet?" I whispered.

"What?"

"The *angel!*"

He nodded. "Oh yes. Follow me."

Abner led me to one of the exhibition rooms, where the angel stood with calm dignity in front of a black backdrop. Dozens of people who wanted to improve their collection of angel slides jockeyed for position with every breed of camera imaginable.

I shook my head and chuckled. The angel didn't seem to mind the attention. "Who is he? Or she?" I asked Abner. "Do you have any idea?" Jericho shook his head.

Then he looked as though he was about to say something and decided against it. He scrutinized the androgynous, photogenic face, and the wings, and the sandaled feet. He said, "It's December. You'd think its feet would get cold, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe its boots are in the cloak room."

Abner didn't say anything.

I *knew* that look on Abner's face. I covered my smile with my hand. "Abner, you're not thinking it's a *real angel.*"

"No comment," he said.

"Abner, I'll begin to think you're as bad as the full grown adults who come in for a noon show and then ask us how we opened up the dome and made it dark outside. Don't do this to me."

"Ah won't," he said. "No comment."

Then he said, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap."

" 'Scuse me?"

He smiled. "We trade in illusions," he said. "When the real article comes along, we think it's some kind of trick."

"Stop it, Abner. When we want the real thing, we get a NASA mobile and moon rocks in lucite."

He shrugged.

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I leaned close to his ear then, and murmured, "Of course, I can see Edmund Cass trying to chuck responsibility for shorting his place out, by telling Bauersfeld Automation that God did it."

Jericho whooped and clapped his hand over his mouth.

Later we found out that Zircon's switchboard had been flooded with UFO phone calls the previous night. Zircon's switchboard gets flooded with UFO phone calls whenever there is a full moon, Jupiter is in opposition, Venus is at maximum eastern or western elongation, a Concord SST lands at the local airport, or some pretty cloud takes a weird shape. So does the switchboard of most every other large planetarium and a lot of the smaller ones. Zircon's calls had been dispatched with the operator's usual tact and a cluck of the tongue.

The angel and Abner Jericho shared a table for lunch. We surrounded Abner afterwards. I wanted to hear what he thought of the angel now that he'd talked to it; the others wanted to know when the spaceship would open up and give its show.

Smothered in a human maelstrom, Abner shouted, *"Shut thyselves up!!"*

I raised an eyebrow. He was getting feisty in his old age, was he?

"Now listen up!" Jericho announced. "There *will be* a show. Ah don't know when, but Ah'll let you know when it's about to begin. Ah'm going to get a preview of it."

Murmurs of jealousy and surprise expanded to a deafening roar. Abner's dome was half the diameter of Zircon's dome. *None* of the little-dome people get to see *previews*.

Abner stood with his hands on his hips. When he got tired of waiting for the din to die down, he pitched his voice to School Show Authority. *"Do Ah have to wait all day?"*

We recognized *that* tone at once. We got quiet.

"Ah'm going to check out the ship and see what it's got in the way of special effects," he said. Jericho was pretty level-headed when he wasn't preaching, but I'd never seen him *this* cool. Well, special effects were his territory. Most of us figured he'd go in, see immediately how everything was done, and impart the knowledge to the rest of us. It was a small ship. It couldn't hold too many people.

"Buy you coffee," he said, taking my arm as the crowd thinned.

When we were seated with mugs in hand, he told me to prevent Edmund Cass or his technicians from purging any of their programs. "Don't let them move anything to the shop," he said.

"What should they do? Their whole system's burned out."

"Almost. They'll have to disengage everything after tonight."

"Poor Ed." I really felt bad for the man. He'd probably have to declare

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bankruptcy, and our business would suffer another casualty. "What do you think they should do?"

He said, without blinking an eye, "Give everything to SETI."

The coffee sat like a pool of mercury in my stomach.

"Abner, I hope you're right about this," I said, a little scared. "I'd hate for you to go off the deep end just because a lot of folks think you're the wrong kind of nut."

He patted my hand, and said, "Ah'm right about this."

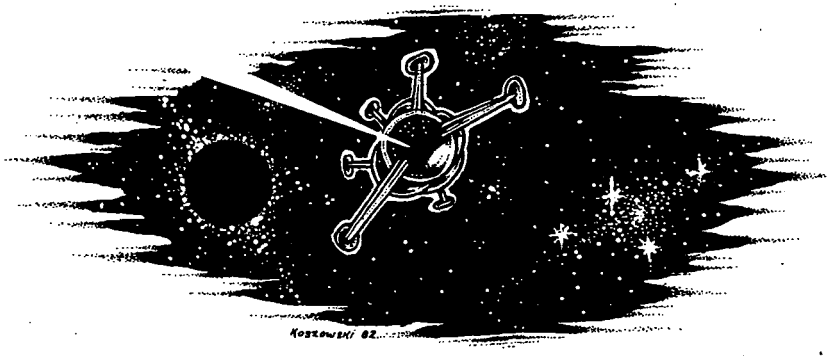
Hours later we all gathered to watch Abner and the angel board the UFO on the lawn. The angel didn't wear any boots and my toes were freezing in mine. Everyone around me jumped when the damn thing took off; most of them spluttered curses to keep from feeling too frightened. I think I was more scared that Jericho would end up being wrong, than I was that we'd had a real angel in our midst. Angel or alien or both. It must have been a long time since this many people and their electronics had gathered together this intent on demystifying the Star of Bethlehem. We must have created some kind of signal.

Inside the Zircon Star Theatre a dozen technicians spluttered their own curses as everything became reanimated and electricity surged. The place was foamed over as small fires erupted and were extinguished. Zircon's switchboard lit up like a Christmas tree.

Cass stared up into the dusk and looked like he was about to cry. I'd catch him before he went in. I needed to tell him to call SETI.

Shivering, I stuffed my gloved hands into the armpits of my parka.

Then I looked up at the real heavens and grinned. I shouted, "Hey Abner, don't forget—you gotta come back and tell us how it *works!*" ●



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TOURIST SPOTS FOR TIME TRAVELERS

1.
The vast architecture of sauropod bodies
flex like demolition cranes
and lumber on with rattletrap thunder
into the twilight shimmering of
a great meteor's trail.
In this era you rough it in the
horsetail treetops.

2.
Further up the line, the sapient
migrations are about as popular.
Way stations out of Turkana.
The overhangs and wind-carved hollows.
The fleeting semblances of the Original.
There it's caravans and binoculars.

3.
In Rome, it's fairly easy to get lost,
and no doubt the press of flesh
in Caeser's square may include
your fellow travelers—cold and
weary without proper accommodations.
They're accreting about a dying flame.

4.
Certainly the darkest fascination
remains Berlin, where you're on your own.
I went only once. There I saw
the ghostly hordes of temponauts
peering over the shoulders
of the bunker's first excavators.
Awaiting the first glimpses of Dante's Hell.

5.
My favorite is a quiet day, Nov. 1, 1959.
Unitas stung Cleveland with mastery:
4 aerial strikes and 400 yards.
But Jim Brown the relentless, the dogged,
ran like a jaguar, moved like an avalanche.
Whether it is the first TD or the fifth or
in between that brisk day in Baltimore,
Brown always stands up stolid and placid,
lumbering back to the huddle so slow
as to defy the ravages of time itself.

—Robert Frazier

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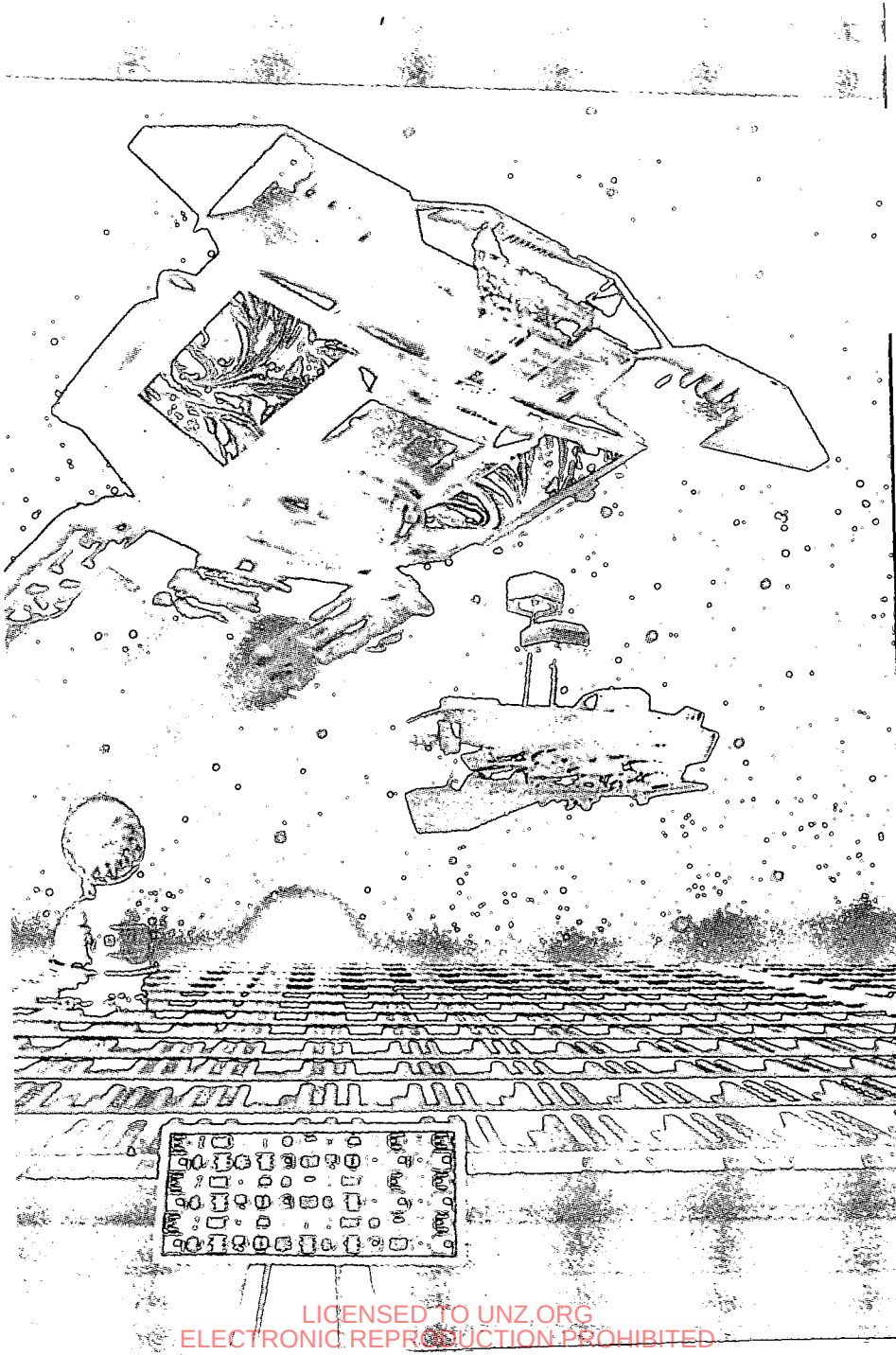

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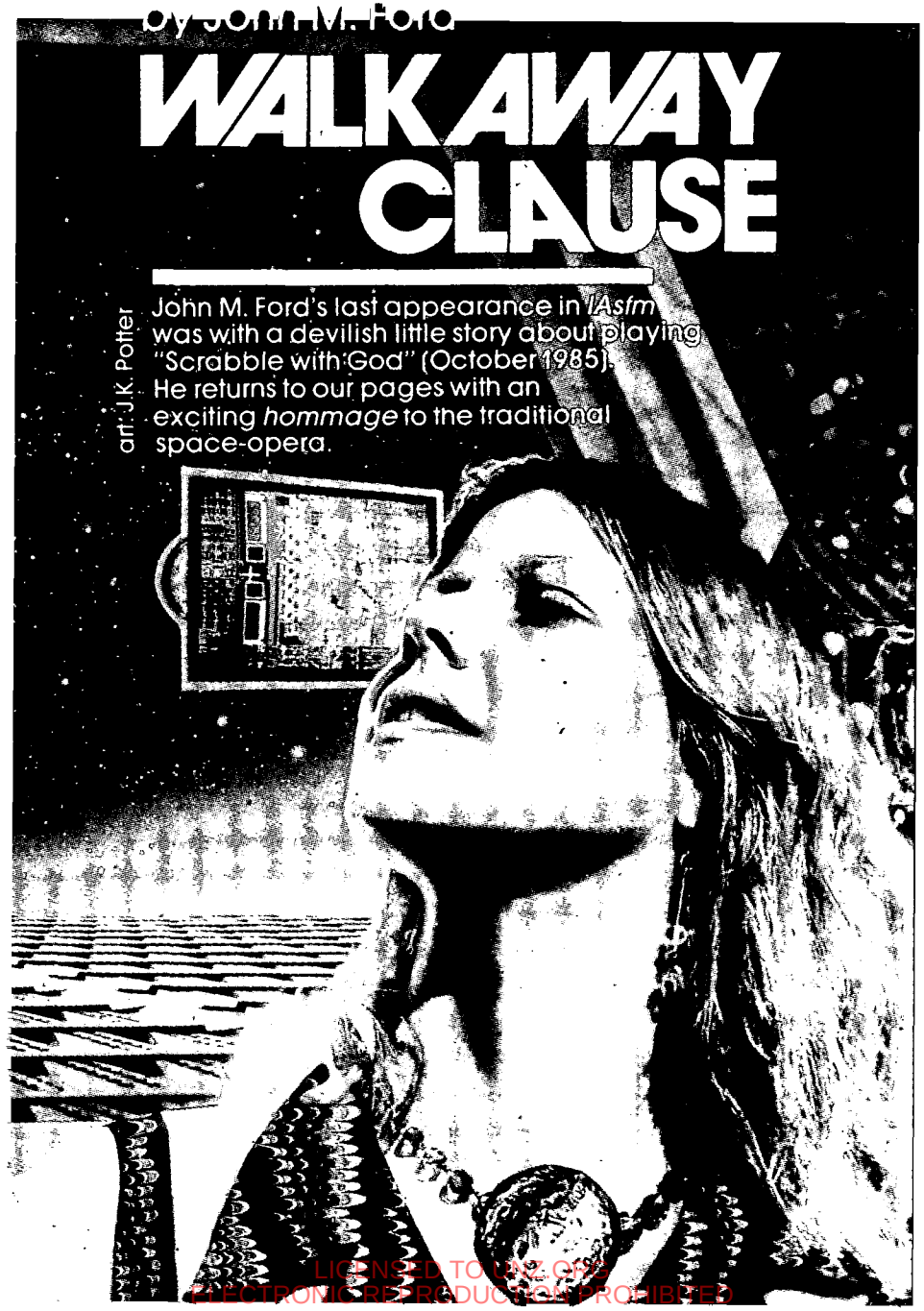
by John M. Ford

WALKAWAY CLAUSE

John M. Ford's last appearance in *Asfm* was with a devilish little story about playing "Scrabble with God" (October 1985). He returns to our pages with an exciting *hommage* to the traditional space-opera.

art: J.K. Potter



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Leah de Vere opened her eyes and saw stars, the sky still quite black through the skylight. A ship went over, trailing bright ions, landing markers flickering down its length.

De Vere rose, slipped on a black silk robe. On the bed, Penfield did not stir. She watched him for a few moments—he liked to pretend sleep, when she woke him rising early—but his breathing was faint and his face was in a silly twist that he never would have shown if he could have helped it. She went out of the bedroom.

She passed Penfield's workroom; there was a soft light within. He had left his drafting board switched on, the command keys glowing, a compound hull curve blocked on the display in green and red and white. She went on by, pausing in the kitchen for coffee, and opened the concealed door from the apartments to her office.

The lights were out, the telcom and data screens all dark. The far wall, all glass, showed stars above and Kensington Primeport below. She walked, bare feet silent on the carpet, to the leather desk chair, sat down and turned toward the view.

It was, de Vere supposed, about an hour until dawn; there was a faint pink smear on the horizon. The Port was running normally, as at any hour, windows bright, cargo vehicles in motion, pools of light around the grounded ships. There were between forty and fifty down—forty-two at sunset yesterday, she remembered—of almost as many designs: long-vaned Starworthys, chunky Herger Blanes, ConVec saucers . . . a few graceful Chandler Penfields. Some she knew by name: *Asperger, The Dyer's Hand, Le Nicholas of Bristol, None O' Your Funeral.*

Off to itself, as if the others shunned it, was a clumsy-looking vessel with odd square folds in its vanes. Penfield had identified it as a GenDyne—from an Earth shipyard, which explained his knowing it—doubtless on its double-dozenth op/owner, cheap to buy but costly to run and ruinous to idle. De Vere had gotten six percent below spot price for its cargo of tantalum ingots by paying all cash and adding a maintenance credit the Bryce downcrew owed her.

It left her with a long position in tantalum, and cash-short, but only for the moment. In half a season High Taprobane Nonferrous would finish its factory expansions and be paying well above spot. And there was nothing wrong with her lines of credit. De Vere Interstellar Arbitrage was as solid as the Kensington Exchange itself. Probably solider. Unlike the Exchange—unlike everybody else who went by the title of Trader—Vistar owned no share in any ship.

She clasped her fingers around the warm coffee cup in her lap, sat watching the Port at work, the ships. In a sense, she owned a little of all of them; points of profit squeezed from brokering cargoes, the inside information of where the points could be found, the crews' trust that

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brought in the information. Sometimes she lent operating capital, because trust was on the market like everything else, but liened against the cargo, or the op's word. Never the ship.

De Vere was willing to lose money, miss information, give up trust, but never again would she lose a starship. Never again.

There was a sound across the room; de Vere turned her head quickly, coffee splashing her fingers, and revolved her chair, though she knew it was Chandler Penfield.

He was standing in the doorway from the apartment, robe tossed over his shoulders. The robe was open in front, and she smiled, and then saw the telcom handset in his hand. "It's the Port," he said, his voice even softer than usual.

"Just because *they* don't sleep . . ." she said.

"You'd better take it."

She reached to switch on the desk telcom. He held out the handset, and she took that instead. "Vistar, de Vere."

"Madam de Vere, this is Tom Cassel, at Port Control."

She knew him: a shift supervisor. Fair and night-shift pale, with straw-colored hair; very young for a supervisor and therefore very good at it. "Good morning, Tom. What's happening?"

"Ma'am, we've got a ship at system fringe, transponder flashing K-for-Kensington 1624."

De Vere was awake instantly.

Cassel said, "According to the file, that's *Myrddin,* registered to de Vere and Hawks. Marked down as lost seven years ago, and the loss confirmed. Is that right?"

"Yes," de Vere said, voice absolutely level, "that's correct. Have you gotten any message from the ship?"

"We've interrogated on tightbeam, but she's still over a light-hour out, no response yet. I thought you should know now, though, Ma'am. Sorry if I woke you."

"It's appreciated, Tom. Please call me as soon as you know anything more."

"Will comply."

She put down the telcom. Penfield was still just standing there. De Vere said, "Did he tell you?"

"Enough."

She turned the chair slowly, looked up at the lightening sky. "It . . . could be him. A drives error . . ."

Penfield said nothing, and de Vere knew precisely why. He had carefully gone over with her, seven years ago, all the things that might have happened, what her choices were, why she should keep hoping. And Penfield was not a man to remind you of things you had not forgotten.

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De Vere said, "If he was seven years out—he could have slipped out of the galaxy. Where could he have gotten stores?"

"He *is* Hawks."

"Yes. But there's the other possibility."

"*Myrddin* with a salvager aboard? Possible. But I doubt—"

"That's not what I meant. I was thinking . . . maybe he just took a long time, coming back. Because he wanted to."

Penfield said, "No. In the first place, he's Garry Hawks, and he wouldn't skip."

"And in the second place?"

"You're Leah de Vere."

"Thank you, Pen." She did not suppose he was joking. He gave the flicker of a nod. She said "What now?"

"We wait, I suppose. Want something?"

"Mmm," she said distractedly. Penfield looked at her, then down at himself. He tried to pull his robe closed, but it was just draped over him, his arms not through the sleeves, and it slipped off his shoulder. He grabbed the hem and stood half-in, half-out. "Hail, Caesar," de Vere said, laughing softly.

He smiled. "So are we all, all honorable men. . . ." He looked out the window, at the last stars before morning, and the smile went away and he turned around, went out of the office.

She took a swallow of coffee, for the heat and not the taste, turned around and looked at the Port. She could not think what to think, what to feel, how to be ready for the call when it came. . . .

When, not if.

The handset on the desk was chiming.

"Vistar, de Vere."

"Tom Cassel again, Ma'am. We've got a transmission from K1624."

"What does—it say?"

"It's a little odd, Ma'am. I'll patch you in."

De Vere reached for the screen controls, but the message was voice. In fact, it was song.

"I see you are a starman,
Who flies the ships so tall,
For only a starman bred and born
Drinks furyl alcohol . . ."

De Vere closed her eyes.

"Madam de Vere . . . Trader? Are you there?"

"I'm here, Tom."

Cassel was silent for several seconds. De Vere wondered how she must have sounded to him. How any of it did. It had been Hawks's voice, of

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course. Hawks' song of homecoming, just as all those times before; Hawks and *Myrddin*, coming home.

Cassel said, "I have to notify the Port Authority, Trader. And the insurer, because the ship's recorded as legally lost."

She nodded, then realized she was not on screen. "Surely, Tom. How long out is he?"

"My estimate's five hours, Ma'am."

"Five? How long have you—"

"I called you the minute the ship hit the screens, Ma'am. I've checked it three times since then, and it still comes up the same. K1624 planed into the system at no more than half the minimum possible range."

She thought for a long moment. No answers came. "Have you told Kenpath? About this, I mean."

"No, Ma'am. It's no affair of the Port Authority's, the approach is perfectly legal—unless you count the laws of physics, and I don't have any rules about breaking those. Do you want me to try a priority call, before the ship gets into the local control pattern?"

"No . . . thank you for all you've already done, Tom. We—I'll be at the Port shortly."

"As you wish, Madam de Vere."

She was left in the silence again, the dawnlight. She carried the handset back to the bedroom. Penfield was not there, but his closet door was slightly open. She supposed he was in his workroom, dressing. Dressing made sense, she thought; take matters one logical step at a time.

As she opened the closet, she touched the sleeve of the gown she wore, and thought about what Hawks would say, and think, to find her in black silk on his return. The mirror inside the closet door swung into view then, showing her the disordered bed, the pillow with the print of Penfield's head.

It seemed that a hand was squeezing her heart; the hand of something dead, or that should have been dead.

Penfield was waiting for her in the Vistar lobby, by the elevators. He wore a gentleman's gown of royal blue, cut to flatter his somewhat thick body, a small amount of delicate silver jewelry, and the starburst pendant of the Ship Architect's Guild on a Master's triple chain. He was looking at the toes of his boots when the door opened, but as de Vere approached he looked up at the painting that dominated the lobby wall. The mural showed a starscape, torn by the fire-colored streak of planodrive effect, and a heroic figure striding on the sky. The man was Garry Hawks. The artist had worked from a photoprint of Hawks in almost exactly that pose.

She said, "I suppose we'll have to paint over it."

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"Oh, I don't know. I think he'll rather like it." He turned to her. "Good morning, Madam Trader."

"Good morning, Pen."

He nodded. "I wanted to hear you say that." He took her hand in his own delicate fingers, kissed it. "And that's a very lovely outfit."

She looked at herself, realizing that she had dressed almost at random; fortunately her closets were in good order and everything matched. She wore soft boots, a tunic and trousers of conservative cut in red velvet so dark as to be almost mourning color. After a moment she said "Thank you . . ."

"Of course. I wanted to hear that, too. Shall we go?" His smile was faint, but it seemed genuine enough.

"Surely," she said. "Shall we walk?"

He said, "Since it's such a lovely morning, why then of course." They rode the lift down, went out of the building. Ahead, through the early, angled sunlight, the ships at the Port made lakes of shadow, and the metal of their vanes was dazzling. It was almost three kilometers to the nearest entry gate, and she knew he would never have suggested the walk to her. But she also knew how much it pleased Penfield; he could take his time to savor the sight of the Port, and of the ships, especially those his hands had shaped.

And today, perhaps, the sight of her as well.

"There she is," Penfield said.

The ship was first a bright star, then a streak, and in only moments a shape: it was a fast approach. Its Captain made no others.

De Vere and Penfield were watching from a crew shelter, right on the edge of the landing pad. In the next shelter, the Becker downcrew were getting rigged to receive the ship. Becker were expert, efficient, very expensive, and silent as the grave. It was that last quality that made them worth the money.

The Port was quiet. De Vere had checked her portelcom half a dozen times, waiting for everyone with a favor owed by or a grudge against Hawks—which once would have meant half the Kensington Exchange—to call, but the counter said there were only two calls on the office disk, neither of them Priority, no more than normal for this hour of a working day. There were no screening eagles, waiting to report the Return of Light-Captain Hawks to all Kensington and the stars at large. Even the Port Authority and Whiteweld's, the insurance carrier, hadn't appeared yet—though they were big operations, and slow, not like the arbitragers who peeped around their colossal legs. And she supposed that Supervisor Cassel knew how to keep things quiet, even as he knew when to leak them.

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Or perhaps there just weren't that many left who remembered. Tom Cassel must have been still in school, seven years ago; was Hawks even a legend to him?

She felt a touch on her arm. Penfield was holding out a pair of ear valves. She put them in, just as the ship's airthrust became audible. She looked up.

It was without question a Penfield design: his name was signed in the vanes and the curve of the hull, spoken by the low roar of thrust—Penfield's hulls cut the air smoothly, without whistles and screams. And in a moment more, when the ship rolled into its landing spiral, she would know. . . .

She saw the trailing edges of the wings, where the multiply split flaps were covered by curved plates, lapped like feathers. . . . It was *Myrddin;* there was no other ship that it could possibly be.

De Vere looked at Penfield. There was a concentrated hardness in his face, startling in its intensity. "It's not *Myrddin,*" he said, "it's *wrong*—" and then her ear valves closed against the hammering of thrusters and the rest of Penfield's words were lost.

The ship went into the spiral still carrying enough velocity to have flung it back into orbit; it whipped around the loop, dumping kinetic energy into the air, the spiral tightening down to nothing. Then, almost to padover, ions flared in showers and the airthrusters revolved; dust-dragons reared up on the pad, de Vere lost her balance in the wind and bumped against Penfield. And the ship stopped still, hanging dead-center above the landing pad. It settled down with a sort of maidenly decorum. De Vere glanced over at the Becker crew; they were all frozen in tableau, silver statues in their flameproofs.

Legends, she thought, he had made legends. Though Odysseus had come home in disguise . . .

Then she noticed that she had wrapped Penfield's slim hand in hers, and her knuckles were white with squeezing.

She let go. "You said . . . something was wrong?"

Penfield was looking directly at the ship, face still set. "Look at the plano housings. The landing struts. That's not *Myrddin.* Not *my Myrddin.*" He always said that when the architect was done, the ship had to be let fly; but he had always before been happy to see one of his own come home. Even when they had been modified, even half-wrecked, he had never been like this.

De Vere could see no differences, but she was not Penfield. On the forward flank of the forty-meter hull, the hatch was opening, the crew lift swinging outward, just as she had seen it a hundred times . . . and then there was a man on the lift, descending, and she was out of the shelter and on the pad, walking very fast, ordering herself not to run.

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"Leah!"

The man vaulted off the lift, a meter and a half to the ground, and ran to her, wrapped his arms around her; her heels left the ground. "Leah," he said again, a sob, and then he was kissing her, his tears wetting her face. De Vere closed her eyes, put her hand behind his head; they held the kiss for a long time. There was no sound in the world. She slipped her fingers into his hair, to stroke the ridge of scar tissue just behind his right ear.

He growled happily at the touch. But there was no scar.

She felt for it again, to be sure, but the skin was smooth, the growth of hair undisturbed. She eased from his embrace, looked around; Penfield was nowhere near, nor by the ship. She turned toward the shelters. The downcrew were rolling out, not as fast as one expected of Becker, with hesitant glances toward the couple on the pad.

"Leah . . . I hardly believe it, even now, Leah," Hawks was saying. "I never thought . . . but I dreamed you'd be here. There's so much to tell you, Leah. So much to ask. What have you been doing, since . . . do you know, Leah, I don't know how long it's been?"

"Seven years," she said automatically.

"Seven?"

She looked hard at the shelter. Penfield was not there.

The man who looked like Hawks said, in Hawks's voice, "Look at me, Leah. Please look at me. I did know it had been a long time since I'd seen you. A terribly long time."

She turned to him, said levelly, "Who are you?"

"Hawks, daring Light-Captain of the . . ." Then his voice went hollow. "It's *Garry*, Leah."

"No, you're not," she said, not loudly. "What's it about? A Vanderdecken swindle? Insurance scam? You're a pretty good copy, but you're *not* Garry Hawks."

He reached out, put his arms around her—she hesitated, and was caught—he spread his fingers along her spine and *pressed*—

"Garry," she said, because there was no one else, living or dead, who knew that touch. Not even Penfield. "What . . . happened, Garry? I thought . . . we all thought you must be dead."

"I was," he said. "I'll show you. Come and see what happened, when I died." He released her, motioned toward the ship. She went with him, ascended the lift. She strained with memory, trying to see the differences Penfield had seen so clearly, but nothing definite would stand forth. Penfield was certain of his hull steel. She was not so certain of this flesh. Odysseus had come home in disguise.

The lock cycled them in, and what she saw then was wholly wrong.

The ship looked new, clean as a passenger liner. The corridor carpet

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was crisp, unworn; the light panels were dustless and brilliant; everything that was supposed to be racked or shut or policed-up *was*.

Penfield had been right: this could not be Hawks's *Myrddin*.

As de Vere turned toward the lock, intending to punch and run, something moved into view at the end of the corridor. It was a ribbed metal cylinder, about thirty cm long and across, with a set of spidery arms, or perhaps legs, at each end. It tumbled up the corridor toward the two people, then stopped, tipped itself up on one set of limbs. One of the upper arms reached out to an access door in the wall, opened it. More arms reached inside, began doing something with the equipment within.

De Vere was quite aware she was staring. She turned to stare at Hawks . . . or whatever this was that called itself Hawks.

"That's Coltrane," he said. "He does corridors, mostly."

The cylinder closed the panel, tilted over and began rolling down the hallway. It paused as it came to de Vere, reached toward her with a jointed metal limb.

Hawks took a quick step around de Vere and place-kicked the robot to the end of the hall. It rolled away down a side corridor. "They're curious little bastards, but they learn quick," he said. "Come on and meet the rest of the band."

They went forward—de Vere noted their route, and they were *Myrddin*'s corridors in all but their clean state—to the Bridge. In the conning room were half a dozen of the cylindrical robots, crawling over and under the boards, watching screens with glowing glass eyes on stalks. One was sweeping the carpet. Another was perched on the arms of the Captain's chair; it seemed to be doing a postflight checkdown.

Hawks pointed around the room. "That's Davis. Hancock, Adderley, Beiderbecke, Shearing. Miller's gone somewhere, and Trane you've met." De Vere could see nothing to distinguish one cylinder from another. Hawks picked the robot off the command chair. It seemed to weigh very little. "This is Parker. He flies the ship when I sleep or whatever. You said seven years? It'd have been ten, except for Bird here." He put the cylinder on the floor, shoved it aside with his foot, sat down. De Vere sat, very slowly, in the Navigator's chair.

There was a small bump, felt not heard, as the downcrew latched on their tractor and air dollies; then the ship began to move from the landing pad, toward the service area. Hawks reached to the board, flipped a switch, and all the viewscreens around them blanked to gray.

"Where . . . were you?" de Vere said. "Where did you get . . . these?" Somehow she hesitated at calling them *things*.

Hawks knotted his large hands together, looked down at them. "I got into a race with Barney Oliff and *Cold Hill's Side*. I had her beat, too, by a full four days; all I had to do was make a thirty-minute inplane at

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an incipient nova. . . . Which turned out to be not so incipient." He looked up. "Barney never told you?"

"*Cold Hill's Side* came in a year after you . . . disappeared. Barney wasn't aboard. A salvager was."

"Not Oliff's ship," Hawks said, alarmed. "The salvager must have been —"

"He was. There were three prior charges of hijacking, on the Coromandel Exchange, which explains why he was still running around loose. Kenpath searched the ship, found some blood and clothing."

"And?"

"We spaced him, by due process." She had been watching the man in the chair, as closely as she examined anyone who wanted to do business with her. His reactions, as she told the story—the worry over Oliff, the flash of rage, the grim satisfaction at ship's justice done—were all just what Garry Hawks would have shown. And now, she could find no trace of annoyance that his tale of the nova could not be confirmed—nor satisfaction that it couldn't be denied—only sorrow, because ship's justice did not return the dead to life.

What did?

"The nova?" de Vere said.

"Yeah, the nova . . . I planed right into it. The screens were all loaded black, and the counters showed all nines, I can't guess how much radiation there was; the ship was burning up, that's all. And me, too . . . I mean, I was dead, Leah, dead right then."

"And?"

"I pushed the button, what else was there to do? I planed out, without a target setting. Who knows what in the registers, all those particles washing through them, and whatever velocity I'd picked up from the compression waves.

"When I came out, the stars were . . . well, I remember there weren't many of them. The sextant couldn't make a pattern match for love nor. The radiation might have fried it, too, or . . . I knew I was dead, and now I was dead and gone. That was when I saw the ships."

He closed his eyes for a moment, shook his head. "They were blue-black, Leah. In bird shapes, all smooth curves and sharp angles, as if . . . as if Chandler Penfield got drunk and found God and designed a fleet all in the same night.

"I was thinking, it isn't possible that I should just blunder into them, whoever they were, and then I thought—and remember, I was dead, *dead* of radiation—I thought, maybe I didn't find them. Maybe they found me. Maybe they were waiting for me.

"Then they said hello, and I knew I was expected."

"Hello?"

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"Just that word. But I don't know—I don't know how I heard it . . . or even what I heard it with."

"And what did they look like? Angels?" It was not that she disbelieved him. Belief and disbelief were suspended in void, waiting for some push to give them a direction.

"I don't know. I don't remember what they looked like." He pointed at one of the robots, which paused for a moment, then went back to work polishing gauges. "Maybe like that. I know they came aboard . . . but it's all just blank."

"And they fixed you, and *Myrddin,* and sent you on your way with eight little robots for company."

" 'Fixed' isn't quite the word." He stood up, stretched out an arm, looked at the spread palm of his hand. "I was *dead,* remember? Marrow dead, germ plasm wrecked, GI syndrome on the manifest . . . They stripped the DNA out of some undamaged cells, and cloned a copy. A copy, just like you said. My mind . . ." He touched his temples, where there had been no scars; the genes do not remember scars. "I remember being told it was 'brain-transfer,' but what they meant by it—I don't know if it was chemical or electrical or if they just pulled the grey cells out of the old case and shoved them into the new one. That must have been when they wiped themselves out of my memory."

De Vere realized suddenly that this man was precisely the Hawks she remembered—but the memory was seven years old. He should be over forty, and he was not. "And is the . . . cloned copy . . . exact?" It couldn't be, of course. If he were a clone, he was no more than his own homozygous twin; his retinas wouldn't match the old Hawks's, nor his fingerprints. Perhaps that was very clever.

Hawks looked at the backs of his hands, flexed the fingers, watching the movements of muscle and bone beneath the smooth skin. "I don't have to eat for days at a stretch, unless I just want to. I don't have to take a dump in a month; you think the ship's clean, you should see the head. . . .

"There was something else they told me . . . whatever they were using to translate didn't get it all, or get it right. It was something about 'cellular errors,' and . . ." Hawks closed his eyes, seemed to strain at the thought. ". . . 'body evolution something something shorter cycle brain evolution something.' And do you know, Leah, what the awful thing is? I think, just maybe, I know what it means. I think I slipped the teeco."

"That's not . . . possible," she said, wondering at once if there were a more irrelevant thing to say. Even if he were an actor, this all a script, the ship had in fact planed in five hours from the Port; that was not possible either, and could not be done with lights and makeup.

"Time's a paper function," Hawks said, "rotate the paper and the

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t-coordinate looks just like the x or the y or the z. I'm not saying they were . . . our future, you understand: but only angels make more sense, and I hardly believe I just said that.

"But you *see,* Leah, it doesn't matter what they were, or who or where or when . . . what matters is that I made it back. And found you waiting for me."

"Waiting," she said, distantly, as her mind raced.

Something hard and cold touched the back of her neck. She turned, saw the glass eyes of one of the robots staring back. Hawks was instantly out of his chair; he grabbed the cylinder by two of its legs, raised it over his head, and threw it into another robot across the room. The two cylinders bounced, disentangled themselves, and rolled out of the conning room.

It was, de Vere thought, exactly what Garry Hawks would have done.

"The damned things humor me," he said slowly. "I'd have spaced 'em all, except . . . they were helping bring me back." He put his arms on hers then, knelt by her chair and buried his face in her hair.

She stood with him, her fingers settling easily into well-remembered places, and they moved as one toward the doorway. The robots tumbled out of the humans' way, perching on consoles to watch as they went by.

De Vere looked at the corridors; they still seemed familiar, but she said, "Garry . . . did the—rescuers leave everything where it was?" She felt his intake of breath. "On the *ship.*"

"Yeah. On the ship too. With allowance for improvements." He hesitated, said, "There's something I ought to warn you about, though. You may find it strange, the first time."

"Yes, Garry," she said, quite calm because she had no idea what to think.

"Coltrane makes my bed. Hospital corners and everything. I can't stop him."

She laughed. So here they were, laughing and stumbling down *Myrddin*'s halls again, not even waiting for the downcrew to knock off, Hawks home to de Vere like a hundred times before.

But different, this time—

She scrambled the thought, tried impossibly to suppress it, in a flash of fear that this new improved Hawks could read thoughts as his rescuers had—but he showed no sign of knowing she was afraid, and that he could not conceal and still be Hawks.

Penfield would—

Again she stopped the thought.

Penfield, as all things, in his time.

With a small, smooth movement she drew out her portelcom, thumbed the Accept switch from PRIORITY ONLY to NONE; let the unit drop

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to the carpet. She was just aware that one of the robots caught it as it fell.

It was late afternoon when de Vere and Hawks entered the office building, stepped into the lift. Through green-gold glass, the courtyard, then the Port, unrolled below them.

"You've done well for yourself, Leah. But then, I knew . . ." He shook his head, turned away from the window.

The car came to a stop, and abruptly de Vere knew they should have taken the private lift. She had wanted to show him the view. But too late now to change; the doors opened like curtains on the lobby mural.

Hawks stared at the heroic vision of himself, then laughed. "Oh, Leah, it's . . . oh, Leah my dear."

A shadow fell across the painting. De Vere stepped quickly from the lift, almost speaking Penfield's name; but it was no one she knew.

It was a large, wide-shouldered man in an extremely plain gray suit. His flat face showed old scars, one splitting his left eyebrow, and his nose was impossibly perfect, a complete rebuild. One big, scar-seamed hand held a briefcase of the same gray as the suit.

"Trader de Vere?" he said, in a coarse but calm voice. "And Light-Captain Hawks, I think?" The painted Hawks, twice life size, was pointing over the man's shoulder. "My name's Larrabee. I'm an adjuster, on contract from Whiteweld's Risk." He gestured with a shoulder toward the closed office door. "My calls were goin' to the disks, and you don't seem to have a secretary, so I've just been waiting out here."

"I'm an arbitrager, Mr. Larrabee. We do business mostly on screen. When no one's on screen, no business gets done."

"Of course, Trader." Larabee smiled. His lips were slightly out of true. "But I'm here now, so can we go inside, and talk a bit?"

"What do you want to talk about, then?" Hawks said, loudly, a little dangerously.

Larrabee turned to him, smiled again. "Nine million's the indemnity sum, paid seven years ago on a presumed loss. The ship's name was *Myrddin,* Captain Hawks, a Penfield hull. I believe you were s'posed to have been aboard at the time." He turned back to de Vere. "You did understand someone would be around, didn't you, Trader?"

"Yes," de Vere said, not quite a lie—she had known, and then other things had pushed it out of her mind. "The situation's . . . rather unusual, Mr. Larrabee. But there was no fraud—"

Larrabee held up a hand. De Vere saw Hawks twitch. The insurance man said, "There's been no accusation of fraud, Trader. In fact, the company is offering to pass it through the Business Credit Division, consider it a loan at a favorable rate for unsecured credit."

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Numbers began clicking into de Vere's mind. "Below ten percent?"

"Nine point five. The total owing would be just short of seventeen million."

The mental numbers rolled on: Vistar's total book worth was about twice that. Book worth was only theoretical, of course: if she actually liquidated, she could just about hope to make the payment.

Liquidated. The nice word for *sold everything she owned.* Also a nice word for *murdered.* De Vere smelled a rotten coincidence. "And the payment terms?" she said tonelessly.

Larrabee's fingertips drummed on the grip of his briefcase. He looked embarrassed . . . as Penfield did, when he wanted her very much, and could not say so.

De Vere's eyes flicked to Hawks, scanned him. He was glowering, and she knew the terrible energy that would be building inside him.

Not quite true, she thought; she knew the old Hawks would be ready to explode. But this one . . .

Larrabee spoke suddenly. "Terms strictly cash, Madam. No refinancing available . . . they made the available options very clear."

"What *are* the options?" She could sense Hawks's confusion. He had never known anything about finance. But if she had guessed right about the insurer's intentions, it would soon be clear enough even for a daring lone Light-Captain.

"Cash," Larrabee said, his voice becoming very precise, "or a share in de Vere Interstellar Arbitrage of equivalent worth, based on book value . . ."

That would be controlling interest, of course, but not by so much as to make them look greedy. Fifty-two percent or so. The bastards would have calculated it very carefully.

". . . or, of course, possession of the indemnified property."

"You want my ship," Hawks said. "You're nothing but a hijacker."

Larrabee looked at Hawks, blinked. His voice lost its precise quality, becoming slow and thick again—and, de Vere thought, curiously gentle. "Light-Captain, you've got to know salvage law: when a property's lost, and insurance money paid, th'insurer owns the property if it ever gets found. Now, ships don't get found too often, but sometimes they do, and sometimes they're intact, and that's what I take care of."

"Like you took care of Barney Oliff," Hawks said.

"I don't think I handled . . ." Larrabee's face tightened, the scars whitening, and he said "Oh," very quietly indeed.

De Vere said "It's nothing, Mr. Larrabee."

Hawks said, "It's a *lot* more than nothing."

Larrabee's fingers twisted on his briefcase handle. "I'm not a thief, Captain. I don't hurt people. If I said somethin' to insult the Trader, then

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I 'pologize right now . . . but you truly did say a nasty thing to me, Captain Hawks."

There was a sudden blur of motion between the two men, and a short, explosive sound; de Vere thought that a gun must have been drawn and fired, and Hawks was not carrying a gun.

Then Hawks and Larrabee staggered apart. Larrabee was holding his gray briefcase with both hands, in front of his chest. Hawks clutched his right fist in his left hand. De Vere pieced the action together: Hawks had thrown a punch, and Larrabee had brought his case up to block it. Both of them had moved with astonishing speed.

Larrabee looked down at his case. The side was punched completely through, and electronic parts spilled out, from a portable computer or telcom smashed to bits within. Without a word, the recovery agent put the case under his arm, so that the hole did not show.

Hawks was standing rigid, his eyes still hot; but there was now a bleakness in his look as well, as if he had suddenly seen an awful truth.

De Vere knew what the realization was. Hawks was frightened, and he was not used to fear.

Larrabee said, "I didn't mean to rush things, Trader. I won't bother you any more today. You can call me at the Port hotel . . . pleasant day to the both of you."

"I'd like to replace your gear," de Vere said.

"No need, Trader. Nothing special in there, and my contract with the insurance people covers expenses." He called the lift, stood smiling until it came and the doors closed behind him.

"Nerves," Hawks said, looking at his hand, which showed no sign of damage. "The new ones work very well. So I fly as the gannet, and strike as the—hell with it." He looked around the lobby. "Is this all yours?"

"You can buy quite a bit with nine million," she said. "Come in and see the rest." She took a step toward the door, and suddenly wondered if Penfield was home on the other side.

The door opened for her. She remembered at the last instant to touch the plate and admit Hawks; of course the room scanners did not have his pattern.

The office was dim with afternoon; it brightened as the wall screens flickered to life. Messages and data ran up the plates, the world waiting on disks for her return. Though not really waiting, only stored. The world never waited.

The door to the apartments was closed, invisible. De Vere went to the desk, ran down the long list of stored messages; none of them was from Penfield.

Hawks stood by the window wall, staring at the Port away and below. "I knew you'd make it, Leah. No matter what." He turned toward her.

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"But . . . seventeen million? You're worth—I mean—you've done that well?"

"A point here, a point there," she said absently, looking at the screens; a lot of the calls were from her banking and currency contacts. Too many for comfort.

One was from Tom Cassel. She checked its time mark: it had come in just after his shift ended, seven hours ago.

"—but we can't let them have *Myrddin,* Leah," Hawks was saying, looking out at the landing fields. "Not for nine million, or seventeen, or a hundred. She's *priceless.* Her drives alone—she can plane in at half the old minima. Maybe a third. Money's twenty curses to me, you were always right about that, but I know how much system fuel costs, and what time's worth—wasn't I a racer, Leah? Wasn't it a race that got me into this?"

At once de Vere saw it clearly: the source of all the stinking coincidences, of the haste to make the grab. It had nothing to do with an insurer wanting its money back—Whiteweld's would have more than seventeen million invested in executive bathroom keys. The company wanted something else entirely. She punched the numbers to play back Supervisor Cassel's call.

He was in an enclosed public booth, probably at the Port; he still wore his ID badge, and his Tower headset hung off one ear. There was a pocket scrambler on the booth's writing shelf; a white symbol was burned into the upper corner of the picture, indicating that de Vere's private line circuits were clearing the signal.

"This is Tom Cassel again, Ma'am de Vere. Master Penfield gave me your scrambler number, and I think I'd better use it. I told you I had to notify your insurer, and I did, but that was *all* I did—Look, Ma'am, not long after your ship touched down, one of the controllers took a break, and I think made a call to someone. I didn't have a chance to tell you about it till now.

"I won't tell you who did it, it's not against the rules to give out APCON data, but we've just had a bunch of inquiries about that particular inplane and approach. Somebody wants to know about your ship, Trader, and if you don't want 'em to know you'd better get it under cover quick.

"That's all. G'day, Ma'am de Vere."

The screen went gray. De Vere almost laughed; they had gotten under cover all right, but quite the wrong secrets.

"That was the super, right?" Hawks said. "When I was that age . . . well, we owe him one. Now we've got a head start on Larrabee and company."

She looked at him, then realized that he did not know how old the call was, just how late it had gotten to be.

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Penfield, she thought, yes, now, finally. She went to the panel that hid the apartment door, opened it.

"There's more?" Hawks said, and followed her through the door. Lights came on as de Vere went from room to room, then went out behind her, leaving Hawks in darkness after darkness. The kitchen was empty, the common room as well. The bedroom was dark at the end of the hall. The door to Penfield's workroom was slightly ajar. Without hesitation de Vere opened it.

The drafting board was switched off. The window louvers were shut tight. No one was there.

De Vere turned around. Hawks stood in the doorway; he looked around blankly. Then his look alit on the ship models hanging from the ceiling. "We should call Chandler Penfield," he said. "Get hold of your ground crew—Becker, weren't they? Nice we can afford them. But I'll call Pen. Maybe he can help; at least I can trust him with her." He grinned. "Hell, if I can't trust Penfield with her, who can I trust?"

Then he stopped short. She waited. He said "Damn. Seven years . . . I don't even know if Penfield's still around here."

Inside de Vere, tension snapped like a string, and she was suddenly shaking all over. Her elbow knocked over a stack of papers that fluttered down all around her as she dropped to her knees. Hawks hurried to help her stand, making incoherent noises of concern.

De Vere struggled to explain, and then Hawks looked at what was all around him, and finally understood what it meant. That began the explanation, and the rest came out very quickly—how much more *was* there, really?—and smoothly, as if there were no pain in it for anyone at all.

"No offense, Trader de Vere, but you understand how it is." The broker on the screen played unconsciously with his right ear, looking embarrassed. De Vere thought that he did not look half embarrassed enough.

She said, "Yes, thank you, I do understand how it is," which was absolutely true, and broke the connection.

How it was was that quite overnight the markets for her property had all tightened down to nothing. If she sold everything—and of course if a major trader started dumping contracts, let alone hard goods, the prices would slide even further—she might not even clear Whiteweld's seventeen million. Which would leave her nothing but their pound of flesh, waiting out there on the pad.

How it was was perfectly clear: she could have *Myrddin,* or Vistar. One was the price of the other. The third offer, to leave her with a share of both but out of control of either, was purely for its entertainment value, or maybe a sucker pitch.

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They were, she thought, still being generated about once every sixty seconds.

She went into the kitchen for coffee. The apartment was quiet again; Hawks had gone back to the Port, to the ship. It was a reasonable thing to do. De Vere carried her cup into the common room, sat on one of the floor cushions and leaned back against another.

Her portrait hung on the wall opposite; Penfield had done it, a blueline print from the drafting board, hand-colored with pastels. In the picture she was smiling wisely. It never failed to depress her, that smile. The picture stayed on the wall for Penfield's sake alone.

"You could get, maybe, fifteen thousand for it," Penfield said, from the doorway behind her.

"I called a gallery. They said ten, tops, and that's with the frame." She turned to see him smile; Penfield loved jokes at his own expense, and so she told them. In spite of what they cost her.

Two years ago a real gallery owner had offered fifty thousand cash for the portrait: just think, she'd said to de Vere, an original Penfield you could hang on the wall, without paying crew salaries and berthing fees. Fifty thousand. De Vere willed the digits to stop spinning through her mind. Fifty thousand was one star in a galaxy of millions. And who knew how far Larrabee had reached, who he had warned against Vistar properties?

She said, "I suppose you know what's happening."

"I've heard some things. I've been asked some questions, as *Myrddin*'s designer. The original *Myrddin,* anyway. Is it really what they say?"

She told him.

"There are some rather wild rumors out there," Penfield said, "but none of them approach those robots." He stroked his fingers together. De Vere felt a flicker of desire inside herself, ordered it to die. She said, "What did you tell Larrabee?"

"Nothing," he said, sounding accused, perhaps hurt. "When he calls again, what would you like me to tell him?"

"That his whole operation stinks in vacuum."

"That I did say. He agreed. You do know that most of the pressures being applied around aren't his doing? Whiteweld's are threatening . . . oh, the usual things. I think I actually might like Mr. Larrabee, if the circumstances were different."

". . . *or help to half a crown,*" she said. Penfield looked puzzled, then said, "You'd know better than I would: how much money do I have?"

The numbers rolled over. "Two point six three million."

Penfield waited a moment, said, "I just wondered."

She nodded. He had without doubt known the figure; he'd run his design business tightly and well for years before they had even met.

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There was just no way he could make the offer directly. The flicker returned to life; another miracle.

She said, "Somewhere there's an angle. The big operators always miss angles, that's where our points come from . . . besides, money's all they've got, and the kind of people money buys. No friends."

"*Unlimited* money, which your friends don't have," Penfield said. "And you'd never let a friend be driven to the wall for your sake . . . or even go there willingly."

"That's a terrible thing to say to a trader, shipsmith . . . I remember when you called me ruthless, and meant it."

Penfield said awkwardly, "If you'd had no scruples . . . and their nine million . . . you'd own the Exchange by now, and all the big operators with it." He shook his head. "But you're right about having friends. Figure your angle; then count us all in, sure as hull steel."

She said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to lose Vistar."

Penfield opened his mouth, closed it, then said, as if the words were burning him, "I remember when you said that about ships . . . and meant it." He turned away from her.

"Pen," she said, and he looked back. "If it had been you, on the ship, all those years out . . . would you have come back?"

He shivered from shoulders to fingertips, as he sometimes did in the night. "Yes . . . across any number of years, to you."

"Thank you, Pen." She had not been looking for the words, but the shiver; the shiver was authentic, she knew. As it had not been retinal patterns or fingerprints that proved to her Hawks was Hawks.

Penfield turned away again, and walked out of the room. De Vere heard the door to his workroom click shut. She could not follow, then; when that door, or the one to her study, was fully shut, the other person could not enter, whatever the cause. That was the understanding, and the rule between them.

Neither door was soundproof. But in the years of the rule, they had neither one gone to that extreme.

De Vere changed clothes, into a plain green suit that from a distance could be mistaken for a Port worker's. Pausing once and for only a moment at Penfield's closed door—it would not have broken the rule for her to listen, but she did not—she went down the private lift and out toward the Port.

First she saw the crowd around *Myrddin,* then the flaring lights of an ambulance; as it pulled away from the ship the screening eagles pointed their cameras after it. The lenses turned again, toward de Vere . . . and then past her, to center on Larrabee, his head above the crowd, the scars on his face showing very whitely. He moved, and the reporters moved

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with him; in an instant de Vere realized that he must be deliberately leading them away from the ship.

Then his eyes met hers across the distance, and he made a small gesture, and she knew it was meant for her. She stepped lightly, quickly, toward the crew lift. Her feet crunched on something, and only then did she see the blood on the ground.

De Vere sat in the Navigator's seat on *Myrddin*'s bridge. Hawks was in the Captain's chair, arms folded tightly across his chest.

"I can hardly be held responsible, can I?" Hawks said. "How was I to know he'd send someone to snoop the ship over? Besides, a Captain's got the right to defend his ship against boarders. . . ." Hawks banged his fist into his palm, loud as a rifle shot. "He said he didn't get people hurt. So much for that record . . . I wish to hell it had been the skiver himself."

"Larrabee's man had a warrant of inspection from Kenpath," de Vere said. "Which he didn't actually need: the ship is legally the property of the underwriters until some other arrangement is made."

Hawks looked at one of the cylindrical robots, which was tightening a bolt under his chair. "They're smart, but they can't read credentials."

"And did you program them to kill intruders, with or without credentials?"

Hawks muttered something.

"What was that?"

"Me program them, now there's a joke." He jabbed a finger at one of the robots. It stopped, looked at him. "Adderley," Hawks ordered, "kill Shearing."

The robot tumbled off the console, righted itself, and pointed one of its tool-arms at another of the cylinders. There was a buzzing sound, and the target robot toppled over, lay still.

After a moment it got up again, and both cylinders went back to work.

"You see?" Hawks said bitterly. "My tools are very wise. Far wiser than their master." He looked at her, eyes hooded. "I told Bix to shock anybody who poked around the engines. Not fry, just shock. How was I supposed to know the clumsy groundling would be crawling over the inspection panels away up, and land on his head when he fell?" He paused, wet his lips. "Chandler Penfield wouldn't have been caught like that."

She inhaled, shook her head. "Then they acted on their own? Gave no warning? It matters, Garry. If the Port Authority rules that the ship's a hazard, they can—"

"I *know* it matters," Hawks said, and then his voice turned colder than she had ever heard it, putting ice in her heart. "Was there ever any time

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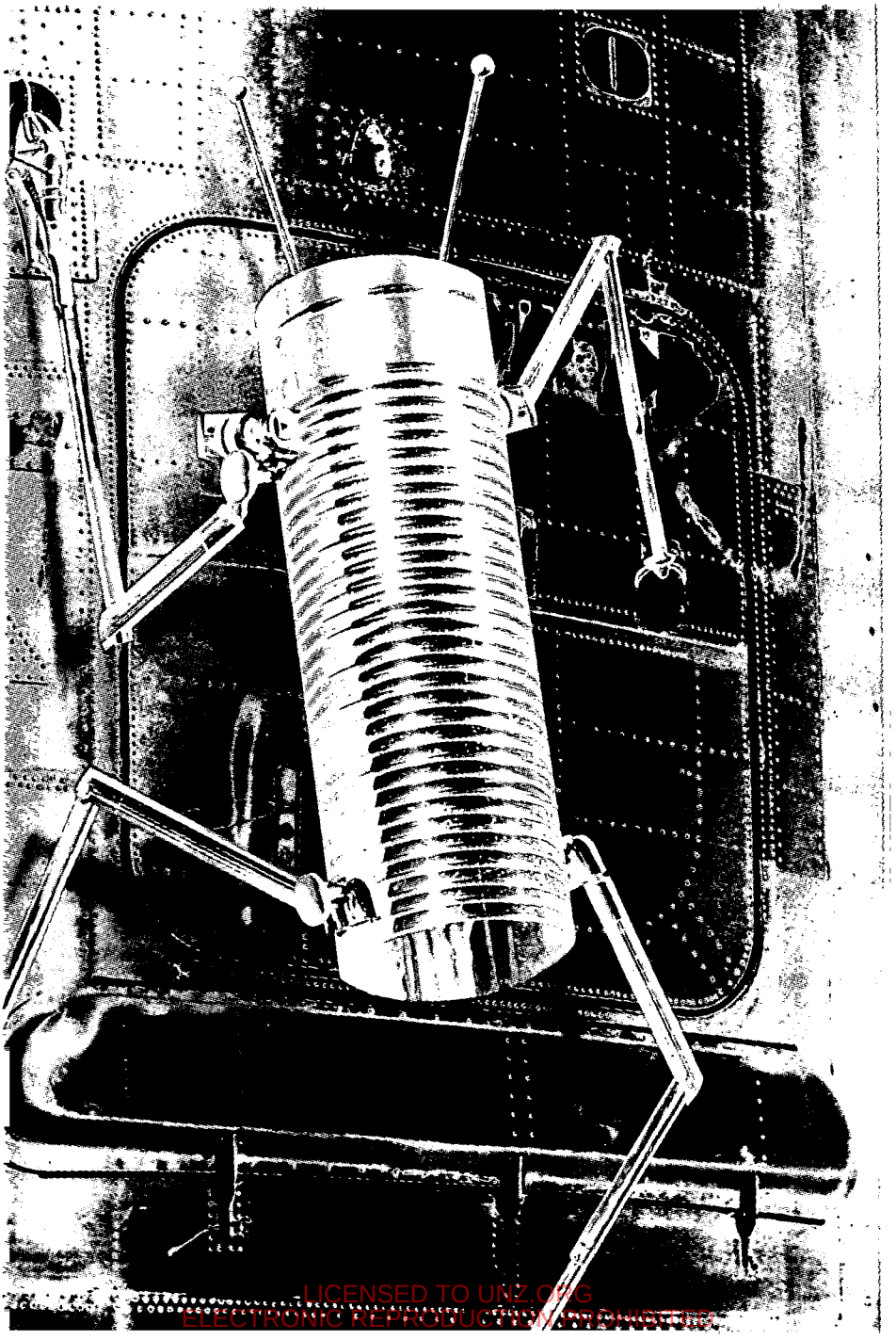

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at all, when I was dead and you were with Penfield, that you thought it might have been his ship that killed me?"

"He suffered enough for that for both of us," she said. "He came to me because he was suffering—"

"All right," Hawks said, almost a whisper. "I understand. I know now. That's all I wanted to know." His voice rose. "Leah . . . let's slip these coordinates. Now, Leah. Right now."

She had expected this, perhaps not quite so soon. "If we run, they *will* charge fraud. We'll be running forever."

"There are places that don't give a shipwright's damn about insurance. Besides, you said yourself that you could pay them off; leave it to them. With a going-away card. Gone to Aneirin. Or Coromandel; no big company sticks its hand in there and expects five fingers back. Or Earth—would anyone even *think* of Earth?"

No one thinks of Earth, she thought, and an idea started to crystallize. But she still had Hawks to cope with. "I'm not going to run," she said, and waited. He would finally explode now, and they would argue, and then they would be able to make plans in fairly reasonable minds.

Hawks didn't explode, or even flare. He said, very quietly, almost unimaginably so, "Well then. Let's give 'em the damned ship, then, and get it over with." He lowered his head.

De Vere said *"What?"*

Hawks's eyes flicked up from shadow into light. Slowly, he said, "That's right, Leah. The ship's yours . . . always was, in law, anyway, but really yours now. I'm yours, if you want me. If not, there'll be some incurious crew that needs a hand . . . but the void's cold, Leah. That's what dying taught me. Cold space, and cold hull steel, and cold starlight, and cold little tin men for company; all that cold gets into your bones." He reached out, took her hand in both of his; his palms were quite cool, and she held back a shiver. "I can't go back into the cold alone, Leah, I'll die . . . again. But if you've found what you want . . . if what you're doing keeps you warm . . . I can't take you from it, and I won't."

She looked into his blue eyes; she saw the source of all cold.

He released her. She felt numb. So it was *all* true, she thought. Hawks had returned, but not the Hawks who had gone out, not the Hawks who had left her a hundred times and one.

She stood up. There was a way; she knew now that there had always been ways. She had just been unable to decide which way to take. "I'm going to have Becker move the ship," she said. "Call off the robots. Have you got enough stores aboard to lift?"

Hawks closed his eyes, shook with a single long sigh. When he spoke, his voice was pure and warm and clear. "This ship's always ready to lift,

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Leah. And there are a thousand more things . . . I'll show them all to you."

She said, "I have to go back to the office, arrange some things. We may need to leave in a hurry."

"It wouldn't be the first time for me, Leah."

She nodded, turned. He caught her shoulder very gently, pulled her to him, kissed her.

She slipped away from him finally, hurried past the gathered robots.

She paused in the tidy, bright corridor, leaned against the wall. She knew what had to be done, knew that it was almost over now. But her arbitrager's instinct, that so clearly drew the futures of metals and biologicals, ore and film circuits, would show nothing of where she would be when it was all done and over.

There was a soft thump. One of the robots was sitting at her feet. It put out an arm, very slowly, and tugged at her trouser leg.

She tensed, to kick it away just as hard as she could. Then it let go, rose on one set of limbs and began spider-crawling away. It paused, looked back at her with its stalked eyes.

De Vere followed.

They went down to the lower deck—the robot tossed itself from one ladder rung to the next with a careless precision—and through the narrow downdecks passages that twisted around machinery and cargo spaces. The canister stopped in front of the C cabin, the port-forward auxiliary. It climbed up the ribbed bulkhead wall, brushed a bit of dust off the door, then telescoped a thin arm to touch the lock plate. The door opened. The robot flipped through, into the darkness.

De Vere followed. The lights came on for her.

The space was fitted out as a cargomaster's office, a common use for C cabin—but not aboard *Myrddin*, never before now. Figures and graphs were flickering up multiple banks of small screens, taking their turns on a large central repeater board: futures contracts, spot prices, price projections and minimaxed route analyses and . . .

Metals and biologicals.

Ore and film circuits.

She leaned across the command desk, her spread hands mashing buttons. Screens flashed and froze and whirled madly. The big repeater spread out the Kensington Exchange before her, so many stars, so many worlds, so many possible trades waiting to be made.

The room could have been put here for Hawks's use, but it hadn't been. Hawks would not know what to do with a tenth of this hardware, this information—just as he knew better than any pilot alive what to do with *Myrddin*'s astonishing new planodrives and thrust curves.

He had promised to show her miracles on the ship; but he could not

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have known *this* was here, not without telling her, showing her at once; not and still be Hawks. And whatever else he might have become, he was still Hawks.

Just as she (as Penfield said) was de Vere: and this place was made to her use.

De Vere looked up at the displays, the rushing and frozen numbers and the beautiful stars mirroring her mind. She let her aching eyes rest upon one still, small graph, reading the dates indexed down its side. She gasped.

Time's a paper function, she thought, *spin the paper and the teeco is just like any other axis—like any of those we can travel along—*

She stared at the robot, spoke just above a whisper. "You're not going to tell me what it's *for,* are you? No more than you told Hawks. Just hand us a bucket of parts and wait for us to put a destiny together. Is it something to do with free will?"

The little metal creature folded both its sets of legs, huddling in on itself like a whipped animal.

De Vere went out of the cabin. The lights went out behind her, and the robot closed the door. De Vere hurried to the ladder, the lock, the lift, terrified that she might meet Hawks, because if she did she might tell him to spin up and lift *right now,* to go, go, go with *Myrddin* and all it contained, all it knew—

The evening air cooled her fever, the Port smells and sounds bringing her back to the world of mechanism and causal order. She walked across the berthing areas, making the smallest nods to the people who recognized her. She went into the terminal building and found an enclosed telcom booth.

Larrabee was wearing a worn brown bathrobe, a pair of reading half-glasses that made his worn brown face look oddly professorial. "Good evenin', Trader," he said, and she could hear the very real gentleness in his voice. She wondered if he really liked his work—she was quite sure he was good at it, but the one had very little to do with the other. She was thinking how easily a talent, a skill, a knack, could turn into a trap. . . .

"You win, Mr. Larrabee," she said. "Just give me until morning to get my affairs in order."

Larrabee bit his lip. "Trader de Vere . . . y'understand . . . aw, hell. It'll be all right, Ma'am. No one'll bother you."

"Thank you, Mr. Larrabee." She broke the connection, left the booth and got a livery car to take her home. There were a great number of calls still to make, without third parties looking in.

She got into the private lift, felt her weight increase with its rise, and

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thought of ion thrust, and planodrive flash, and what was past, and passing, and to come.

Light-Captain Kindermann of Earth appeared on the telcom screen in the Vistar office. Kindermann was on the bridge of his ship; at least, de Vere assumed it was the Bridge. It looked like a spare storeroom. Every panel seemed to be held together with wire and greased against heavy weather. Kindermann looked about one drink above par. That suited de Vere; she needed him receptive.

"Trader de Vere," Kindermann said pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to talk about that load of tantalum, Captain."

Kindermann looked unhappy. "If it's contaminated, Trader, Ma'am, it wasn't in *my* holds. I admit you can't exactly eat off the deck down there, but . . ."

"There's no problem with the cargo, Captain. I want to talk about another deal. Your ship's a GenDyne, is that right? Earth construction, contract number 81909TR?"

"Uh . . ." the Captain's eyes searched over the panel in front of him. He wiped at something with his thumb. "Right."

"The book value of the vessel is one point eight five million. That's for clean, operable, no-failures status, of course."

"Earth ships may be out of fashion, away out here," Kindermann said, stiffly and with a distinctly puzzled look, "but craftsmanship tells—"

"I don't have much time to discuss this, Captain. We'll assume the . . . historical value of the ship balances any depreciation. Now, I have a load of tantalum with a spot price of one point eight million. I'll throw in fifty thousand cash and call it even."

"*You want to buy this*—my ship?"

"That's the idea."

"I . . . uh . . . could I have some time to . . . discuss this with the crew?"

"You can have ten minutes." De Vere hated to treat the man this way, but time was short in fact, and anyway his crew was his wife and two small children.

"I don't need that long," Kindermann said. He reached under his console, brought out a flat metal box. "It's all still on paper, Ma'am, title and everything . . . we never put in a retinal doohickey."

She almost laughed; she had never heard that word from anyone but Penfield. "That's perfectly all right." It was more than just that, of course. It kept the transaction from becoming instantly available on the Exchange network. Not even Whiteweld's could subpoena and search what didn't exist.

"There's a tip that comes with the metal," she said. "Hold the goods.

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Don't even let on that you've got it. In twelve weeks the local price is going into high orbit . . . you'll clear enough for a new ship. And if you mention my name to Master Architect Chandler Penfield, he'll make sure that you get a good one."

"A Penfield hull . . . ?" Captain Kindermann drummed his fingers on the document box. "Trader, they told me I ought to run a deal with you, anything at all, just for the experience, but I . . . could you tell me just one thing more?"

"Not what you want to ask, Captain. Maybe we'll do business again sometime. Maybe then."

Kindermann signed off respectfully and the telcom screen went blank. De Vere switched off the other screens, the printers, the lot. She turned her chair, looked out through the glass. It was just growing dark; a ship flashed past, trailing light and a faint high whistle. It couldn't be one of Penfield's, she knew. His hulls were one with the air. . . .

Penfield came in, carrying a tray with coffee, brandy, and a small spirit lamp. He warmed one of the spherical glasses, gently swirling the dark liquid within, handed it to de Vere. She took a breath of it, a sip, tasting grape and wood, earth and fire. "How many of them agreed?" she said, hearing her own voice as across a distance.

"All of them," Penfield said.

She closed her eyes. *"All* . . . you told them I couldn't offer . . ."

"Leah." Her eyes flicked open; how long had it been since he had called her by name? "This one isn't for money." His hands moved to the tray, the long thin fingers like the wings of some airy creature.

"Angels affect us oft," de Vere said, "and worshipped be. . . . Oh, Pen."

"Coffee?" he said. "Or more brandy?" She could not take her eyes from his beautiful hands. The brandy had hit her with astonishing speed; she dimly recalled that she had gone without dinner. There had been so many calls to make. So much to do. So little time.

"Damn you, Chandler Penfield," she said, "you're doing this deliberately . . . you're going away to see Hawks, and look the ship over, and leave me like this . . . woman wailing for her . . . for her . . ."

He reached out, caught the glass as it slipped from her hand. "It hurts?" he said.

"Yes."

"You're right, then. I did do it deliberately." He was trying to make his voice very hard, not succeeding. "I wanted to know if it would hurt. I wanted to know there was more between us than just . . . something in the dark."

She breathed in deeply, clearing her head. "You always knew you could hurt me, Pen. And would do none. It's all right. But don't tell Hawks . . ." She tried to frame it as other than a threat. ". . . he might not under-

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stand." She pointed at the Port. "You'd better go. I've seen the new *Myrddin,* and all night won't be half long enough for you."

And perhaps, she thought, one of the ship's steel spirits would draw him aside, show him a hidden place in Engineering—

"I'm not going." He picked up his brandy glass, took a swallow.

"I didn't mean to . . . he's still your friend, Pen."

Penfield held up his hands, stopping her short. "I don't want to see Hawks. I *can't* see him. Don't you understand? It's already everything I can do to keep from forgiving him. If we talked—if we even met eyes once—I'd have to do it; I'd have to smile and let you go."

She was confused, a little angry. "And that's what it all depends on? You're letting me go?"

"Of course not," Penfield said, a broad smile on his sad face. "You are Leah de Vere, and you go as you will. You don't need my consent. So please don't demand that I give it."

"If I don't need your consent," she said, watching him closely, "I don't need it to stay."

His expression did not change at all. She was not sure that she could endure the face of his sadness for much longer. "You're de Vere," he said, "and you have to have weighed the choices. You'll go with Hawks, first because it would destroy him if you didn't, but also because you'll never look back from him. If you stay here, you'll look up at the stars every time they come out, wondering what if you were out there with him. But you won't miss me. Not long enough to matter."

"You're a terrible liar, Penfield, did you know that?"

"If you say so."

"What makes you so sure I've made up my mind?" she said, though until now she thought she had. Now the knife was turning, and she was on the edge. It was very sharp, very cold, very hard. She held out her hands, hating the indecision, the helplessness, the knowledge that she could be pulled one way or another, pulled apart. "If you want me, Pen . . . all you have to do is reach, can't you see that? Just reach out to me."

Penfield crossed his wrists against his chest.

De Vere turned away from him, went to the window. All over the Port, lights were coming on. The downcrews were very busy; that was her doing, she knew, the whole Port moving to her scheme. How very, very powerful she had turned out to be, after all.

She said, "You were saying goodbye to me on the morning he planed in. Is this how you wanted it to end?"

"I thought it could only end one way, and I was right. Whatever I thought about the ship—when I saw the two of you meet, there on the

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pad, I knew it was Hawks, certain as any star. And I knew why he'd come back . . . what he'd found."

She spun around. "You *knew* . . ." She was thinking of time, of things met in far places, of the way *Myrddin* had been remade so precisely for her and for Hawks—thinking of Penfield's quiet and his calm, and wondering what he might possibly be.

"Not what he met on the trip out," Penfield said. "What he found on the way back. Something he'd never had before."

"What was that?"

"Loneliness," Penfield said simply. He put down his glass, bowed slightly, and went silently from the office. The hallway lit for him as he entered, and then went dark again.

She listened after him. *He wanted it to hurt,* he said. She took a step. She heard his door open. There would be no more nights like this. She heard the door close. She heard it click, shutting her out for the last time and all time to come.

She turned to face the windows, staring at the sky, hands clenched, choking down a scream. *I go as I will,* she thought at the void.

Hawks had promised to show her wonders on *Myrddin,* meaning nothing but bearings and flanges. The real miracles were still hidden away, in the ship, in the robots, in Hawks's own flesh and nerve and brain. He had come back needing her, to help him make sense of what had happened, *why* it had happened.

She had never doubted that Hawks loved her. Now he needed her. She wondered if the angels in their blue-black bird ships knew just how much she wanted that, to be *necessary*—and if so, how they knew; surely not from Hawks's well-read mind. . . .

But you haven't bought me, do you understand that, whoever you are, or whatever or whenever? You gave me back Garry. We'll look for whatever it is you want us to find.

But it's only a trade, do you hear me? And I never deal without a walkaway clause—and don't believe I won't use it. I have before.

Despite the cost.

The midmorning air was full of ships, blasting noise and debris, hopping from pad to pad; the taxi and tow lanes were congested with more vessels. Every off-duty employee, waiting passenger, and passer-by at Kensington Primeport was crowded against a viewing window, watching the activity outside. The on-duty workers were all too busy watching out for themselves to enjoy the spectacle of the Port gone mad.

In the Control Tower, plotboards flickered and printers spat continuous situation updates, and a double shift of controllers kept order from chaos

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with firm calm words into their miocrophones. But they did not keep it by much.

Tom Cassel, now well into his second straight shift, turned away from his bank of displays, pushed up his headset's sound boom, and said in a firm but not very calm voice, "Mr. Larrabee, don't show me your authorizations again. I've seen them. I don't see where it says on any of them one thing about the right to interfere with Port operations."

Larrabee said politely, "I've got reason to believe that a starship theft is in progress."

"Theft?" Cassel said. "Did you say *theft?* Are you invoking an Emergency Grounding Order to Halt Theft? Is *that* it, Mr. Larrabee? Because if you are, then I've got no lawful choice but to pull the big switch on everything. And if I do *that,* then this whole place is going to suffer the exact analog of a major cerebral infarct. I wouldn't want to guess at the number of insurance claims that'll follow from that.

"But for *you,* Mister . . . whatever you want." Cassel turned to the assistant supervisor. "Trish! On my signal, *Priority Crashola!"*

Larrabee smiled. "No, Supervisor. I was . . . speaking casually. I meant that a . . . questionable property transfer was in progress."

"Okay, that's good then. *Trish, keep 'em flying!* Now, Mr. Larrabee, you go find your questionable property and write your name on it in big letters, and when we're done with this Bavarian fire drill we'll help you find a place to put it." The supervisor leaned toward the recovery agent; he came up barely to Larrabee's shoulder. He stabbed a finger into the big man's chest, his light hair falling into his eyes. "Now, you are an unauthorized and very uninvited visitor up here, so *get your tail out of my Tower!"*

Larrabee offered his hand, which Cassel pumped once. Then the recovery agent picked up his new black briefcase and went out, descending the stairs to a passenger lounge. The far window was still lined with onlookers. Above them, three Herger Blanes and a T. J. Dove danced a gavotte on air.

Larrabee dropped a coin in the coffee dispenser. It ejected a cup into the middle of the lounge and poured one light no sugar down its drain.

"Buy you a real one of those?" Chandler Penfield said. "There's a little tavern in the basement concourse. No windows. Sports trophies on the walls. Not even a picture of a ship."

"I'm warned off starport bars . . . I was a pretty wild guy, once."

"You could have fooled me. But I'll vouch for you."

Larrabee sighed. "Sure, why not? Winner's privilege to buy the drinks, isn't it?"

Penfield said gently, "I can't imagine why you think I've won anything."

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Larrabee's smile disappeared. "Oh. I'm . . . sorry."

Penfield did not answer. They began walking. "Still," Larrabee said, "there's the ship. You have to have had some interest in that . . . even if it wasn't monetary."

"Not really, not any longer," Penfield said. "A ship needs a pilot, a trade ship needs a trader, but the architect has to know when to let his work fly. . . . I'll take you to it, after we have our drink."

"The drink'll wait, Master Penfield."

They went out of the terminal into walls of wind and noise; the confusion seemed to be slightly less total than before. Penfield waved at a downcrew's truck, and the two men hitched a ride on its running board.

"All this—" Larrabee shouted, and waved a hand around. "I thought they must have skipped—and when the Vistar number didn't answer, I was *sure*—"

"There was something about a volatiles spill, I think," Penfield said, in an ordinary tone.

"What?"

"Radiation leakage, as I understand it."

"I still can't hear you."

"Loose nuts on the pad and a bucket of thirty-weight," Penfield said agreeably, and then raised his voice. "Anyway, everyone decided at once that they wanted some alternate berthing arrangements." The truck was nearing the fringe of the Port, and the sound was starting to lessen. "You know the rules, surely; the Authority can't prevent change of berth . . . unless there's an Emergency Grounding or something in effect, of course."

There was the sudden *blat* of a warning horn. Larrabee said, "What was that?"

"And two hard-boiled eggs," Penfield said. He tapped the driver's shoulder; the truck slowed, and Penfield and Larrabee hopped off. Larrabee looked around, turning full circle; then his face hardened slightly, his arms and legs flexing like a fighter's, warming up. His briefcase was in front of his body, like a shield. "All right," he said, "what's goin' on?"

Penfield was extracting noise valves from his ears. "No more than what I told you," he said. "There's the ship."

"Where?"

Penfield pointed, tracing the line of the hull with his finger in the air. "There are people who get very parochial about designs," he said, "but there are a great many kinds of beauty . . . I find that in time, even those box-pleated vanes have their own special attraction."

"Master Penfield . . . I'm not *quite* so dumb as I look. I've got warrants to—"

"You showed them to me, remember?" Penfield said. "They're for a

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forty-meter free-trader-type vessel, just like that; of Chandler Penfield, that's me, design; name of *Myrddin,* you can see the letters on the nose; listed property of de Vere Interstellar Arbitrage, which you'll find it is." He spread his hands, framing the ship. "There it is, in all particulars. Are you refusing to accept?"

Larrabee said, "I've been chasing ships for twenty-two years, Master Architect, sir, and if that's one of yours I'll eat it. It's a GenDyne, and older than both of us end to end—"

"Do you think a designer starts out with a name worth signing to anything? Even Chandler Penfield?" He chuckled. "GenDyne of Earth was my first employer, as a third assistant draftsman. But even after I left them, their influence showed up in my work. All that's a matter of public record." He reached into his gown, produced the bulky papers of title. "Shall I wrap it, or will you eat it here?"

"The name isn't even *on* straight. . . ." Larrabee took the papers, scanned them. Then he shook his head, started to laugh. "Diana shoot me dead," he said, and looked up at the crowded, dusty sky. "They're long gone, aren't they? At dawn, right?"

"Close enough."

"The Vistar assets in the hold?"

"What little could be salvaged from the wreckage."

Larrabee stopped laughing. He sat down on his briefcase, which bore his weight without a creak. He fanned the papers in his hands, looked at them, at the sky again. "Yeah. My wreck . . . I'm sorry I didn't know them better. I'm sorry any of it happened."

"Do you know, I believe you are," Penfield said. "But with the two of them together again, a little capital, and *that* ship . . ." He smiled, with taut lips and deep wrinkles around his eyes, said in a faraway voice, "Oh, I think they will find things to do." Then he blinked, and shook his head, and said in a different tone, "She doubled her money once, you know, all on her own."

"You know, I looked into that." Larrabee stood up. "Found that Captain Hawks left some debts and claims behind him, when he disappeared. If I figure right, she never really saw more than a third of that indemnity money to begin with."

"Something like that," Penfield said. "Your employers didn't tell you that?"

"I guess they didn't think it was important. Well, they'll be my ex-employers, as soon as I turn this . . . fine interstellar vessel over to them. And collect agent's fee—on its book value of nine million, of course . . . which reminds me, till I do that I'm still on expenses, and I'd be pleased to buy you a drink with their money. Do you think you can really get me into that tavern downstairs?"

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"Sure as any star," Penfield said. "Do you think you could show me how to get thrown out?"

Larrabee paused, then dropped the papers into his case and closed it with a snap. "If chairs still bust when you throw 'em, I still know how. I hope they're insured with you know who."

"I knew I'd like you," Penfield said, "when things changed."

Penfield stepped, a little crookedly, out of the private lift. Not the public one—not the one that passed Hawks's mural, and all the Vistar signs.

The bedroom was very orderly, the bed smoothly made. He opened one of the closets, seeing himself in the mirror, next to a spiky heap of bare hangers on the cabinet floor. There was a single shoe nested in the wire; it must have been dropped by accident. It must have been. She was not so cruel as that.

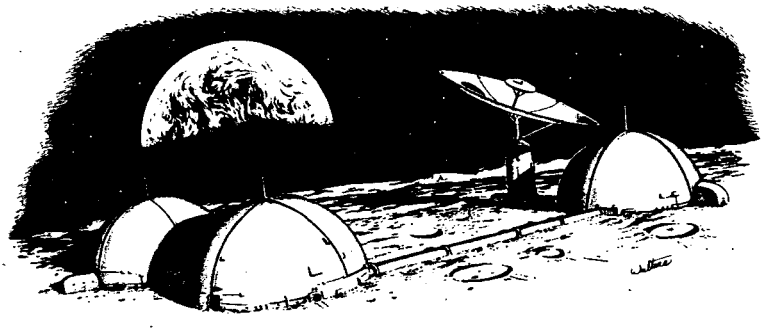
He showered—the water seemed much too loud—wound on a robe and went into the common room. Carefully, he lifted her portrait from its hook. He had paid fifty thousand cash for it, the money going to top off the trade with Captain Kindermann.

It had seemed the right note to end on.

He carried the picture into the office, set it down against the wall below the blank screens. He sat in the leather chair before the panoramic window. The stars were just coming out. The Port was back to its normal, nonstop routine. The Captains and the crews would be celebrating what they had done today for a long while, he knew; one legend passed, another took its place. He must, he knew, find a way to cope with that.

Penfield turned the chair, sat facing de Vere in blueprint and pastel. He had always supposed that he loved her, but he had never been certain; not star-certain, not steel-certain. Not certain enough to tell her so.

Now, well, now he was. ●



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by Nancy Kress

PHONE REPAIRS

art: George Thompson

"Wrong numbers" are usually a nuisance, but they can offer us an elusive glance at another way of life.

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When the phone rang, Dave Potter seized it with a desperate relief he tried not to let Caroline see. From the way her face froze and she turned her back away from him and toward the sink full of dirty dishes, Potter knew he had failed. She had seen the relief. It would only make worse the fight that was already bearing down on them, inevitable and dreary, like one of those unstoppable cold fronts picked out on weather maps in little blue spikes.

The phone call was from his son Brendan, sixteen, whom Potter had not seen in three days. Their hours at home barely overlapped since school had let out for the summer.

"Dad. I wrecked the car." And—belatedly, laconically—"Sorry."

"What do you mean, you wrecked the car?" Potter said, his voice scaling upward in some subtle combination of fear and outrage. Caroline stopped clattering dishes. Her green eyes widened. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," Brendan answered.

"He's all right," Potter said to Caroline at the same moment that Brendan said, "Why the hell were you on the phone so long? I've been trying to get through for forty-five minutes."

"No one was on the phone. Look, what happened? Is anyone hurt? Did you hit another car?"

"Nah. Telephone pole."

"Was anyone in the car with you?"

"Nah. Look, Dad, it's no big deal, all right?"

"No big *deal?* What shape is the Buick in?"

"Well . . . " Brendan said, and Potter heard the drawn-out reluctance and clamped down hard on his temper.

"Where are you, Brendan?"

"Cathy's Towing. Corner of Elm and Hackett."

"I'll be right there. Stay put."

"Can't. Kelso's already here to pick me up. We got the track meet in fifteen minutes. Why were you on the phone so goddam long?"

"No one was on the phone!" Potter yelled. "Stay put until I get there!"

"Hey, I said I was sorry!" Brendan snarled, the snarl now justified by Potter's yelling, by Potter's unreasonable order, by Potter's failure to be an understanding parent.

"Just stay there," Potter repeated. Caroline, tight-lipped, began running water into the sink. On the other end, the phone clicked dead.

When Potter arrived at Cathy's Towing, Brendan wasn't there. Potter's Buick was symmetrically caved in on the passenger side in a deep U. Raw metal gleamed like fangs. Cathy, a beautiful mid-thirties blonde in the dirtiest overalls Potter had ever seen, regarded the car with something close to artistic satisfaction. "Been the other side, your kid've been

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a goner. If he hadn't of been belted in, even." Potter turned his back on her.

At home, Caroline was on her hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor and crying. Potter put a hand on her shoulder; she shrugged it off so violently that Potter nearly slipped on the soapy Congoleum. "Don't touch me!"

"All right," Potter said wearily and went into the living room to make himself a drink. Caroline scrubbed more savagely; he could hear the stiff bristles of her brush rasp across what was supposed to be an E-Z-Care floor. The blue spikes moved closer.

Money. Sex. Kids. In-laws. Those were supposed to be the big four, but Potter knew that this was something else entirely, something both less visible and more pervasive, like lethal radiation. His and Caroline's marital rage seemed to come from everything and nothing, a melt-down at the core, beyond the puny fire-fighting of mere words. It had been going on for months now. Potter saw that it would go on for months more, while both of them watched helplessly, until at some point it no longer did. His hands shook as he poured himself a J & B.

The phone rang.

"Hello?" Potter said.

"Bill!" a woman's voice cried, low-pitched and husky with warmth. "Just a minute—*now*, kids!" Children began to sing "Happy Birthday."

"This isn't Bill," Potter tried to say, but was drowned out by the song. All the children—it sounded like three of them—stayed in tune, their voices high and sweet. When they had finished, the woman's voice returned; Potter could hear the laughter in it.

"And from me, too—happy birthday, darling. You don't know *how* I wish we were home with you!"

"This isn't Bill. You must have the wrong number," Potter said. He felt a perfect fool.

A pause at the other end. "Isn't this 645-2892?"

"No, I'm sorry. This is one digit off that number."

"No, *I'm* sorry," the woman said, a little stiffly. Stiffness didn't destroy the husky timbre of her voice. "I must have dialed wrong."

"I'm sorry," Potter said again, inanely, and hung up. In the other room, Caroline scrubbed and cried. Potter drank off the J & B and poured himself another, staring at the phone.

Potter's daughter Melissa sat cross-legged on the living room floor, scissors in her hand, bent over paper dolls. Her dark hair, a little too long at the bangs, fell in a shiny, tangled curtain over the shoulders of her yellow pajamas. Saturday morning cartoons blared from the television, mindless and irritating as blowing sand. The faded rug bore the

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wreckage of a Friday night at home: spilled potato chips, sticky glasses, Potter's unopened briefcase, the discarded sections of last evening's newspaper mixing with the discarded sections of this morning's as Potter tossed them down from the sofa.

Caroline, bare-footed, padded in from the bedroom. Potter glanced at the smooth line of her thigh beneath her short summer robe, and looked away. Caroline began shrieking.

"Damn it, Dave, why the hell are you letting her cut those up!"

Potter raised himself on one elbow. What he had assumed were paper dolls were in fact photographs, all the family pictures kept in a red-topped dress box which Potter had failed to recognize because the red top was removed and upside-down. Melissa had methodically sliced into at least three dozen of the photos, cutting off all the people's heads. The little girl's eyes, raised suddenly to Potter's face, horrified him.

"Can't you watch her while I at least get some sleep on a Saturday morning? Can't you at least do that?" Caroline shouted, her voice gone shrill with hysteria. She grabbed for the scissors in Melissa's hand. Potter saw beheaded pictures of Caroline waving in front of the Washington Monument, of Melissa and Brendan at the beach, of a dog they had owned briefly three years ago. He saw his wedding pictures.

"That's not too goddam much to ask!" Caroline shrieked. Melissa moved her gaze from Potter, still stunned by it, to her mother's contorted face. Eluding Caroline's grab for the scissors, she twisted her small body to plunge them into Potter's briefcase. The leather released air and a pungent smell like riding tack.

Caroline gasped and seized Melissa. Her eyes met Potter's over the child, their green wiped perfectly blank by shock. Melissa wrapped her legs around her mother and began to sob into her neck. Caroline carried her into the bedroom and closed the door. Potter heard it lock.

On his knees he sorted numbly through the photos, looking for some clue to what Melissa had done, some of the reassurance that might come from finding a pattern to the pictures she had chosen to destroy. There was none. Pictures of relatives, friends, people Potter no longer recognized—all had been equally defaced. In the wedding photo, Caroline, Potter, the best man and maid of honor had each been decapitated. Caroline's white gown floated around what was left of her, tight at the waist and a billowing cloud below, a silk so light and delicately scented that it had once seemed like mist against his hands.

Potter squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as they would go.

The voice on the phone was deep, with a reckless lilt of gaiety. "Connie? Listen, darling, we finished up early here and I'll be coming home on

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the 8:45 flight TWA tomorrow night, and wait till you hear the news I've got for you, you lucky sexy broad!"

"I'm sorry," Potter said, a little resentfully. He knew his voice was pitched a little high for a man and the husky-voiced woman's was low, but there was still a difference. "I'm sorry. You have the wrong number."

Silence, and then the man said in a changed tone, "Is this Dave? At 645-2872?"

Surprised, Potter nodded, caught himself, and said, "Yes. How did you know?"

"We've been getting your phone calls for a few weeks now. The lines must be crossed. Have you been getting our calls?"

"When you all stay home long enough to get any," Potter said, out of a sudden spitefulness that took him by further surprise. The man's—Bill's—voice hardened.

"I'll call the phone company. Don't sweat it. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"Yeah," Potter said. "Me, too."

"She needs therapy," Caroline said to Potter during a commercial for laundry detergent. They had been watching TV in isolated silence for two hours, only one dim bulb left on in the shabby living room. Both children were asleep. Potter had gone to check on them during the previous commercial: Brendan scowling even in sleep, his ungainly adolescent face a clenched fist; Melissa's features so smooth and soft that Potter's heart had clutched in his chest.

"She should go at least four times a week, Dr. Horacek says," Caroline continued. In the semi-darkness Potter could not see her face, was glad of it. "That's at first. Maybe more, maybe less after he gets a feel for her disturbance. That's what he said: 'a feel for her disturbance and what might be causing it.' "

"Four times a week. Jesus, Caroline, the company insurance only pays half of any non-physical therapy. I checked today."

"Yes," Caroline said. She didn't sound surprised. The TV commercial ended and the program, whatever it was, resumed.

"Look at it this way," Caroline suddenly added in a hard voice he didn't recognize but knew immediately had carried them over some border, into a new descent in terrain, "now I couldn't divorce you. We can't afford it."

She jack-knifed off the sofa and went into the bathroom. Potter sat there, reaching for the drink he had already finished. The phone rang.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. William Boylan!" said a professionally cheery voice. "Your entry has just won an all-expense-paid trip to Hawaii."

Potter said nothing.

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"Hello? Is this the Boylan residence? Hello?" The voice sounded a little less professional.

"Yes," Potter said, "but which Boylan did you want? There are a lot of us, and the listings in the phone book are wrong."

"Let me see," the voice said uncertainly, "Mr. and Mrs. William Boylan at . . . I have it right here someplace, here . . . at 5542 Lapham Park Road."

"No, I'm sorry," Potter said, "this is James Boylan on East Main."

"Oh, I *am* sorry," the voice said, all professionalism restored. It added roguishly, "Especially for you!"

"Happens," Potter said. He hung up and went back to stare at Melissa's sleeping face.

There was no 5542 Lapham Park Road. Potter, driving out after work in Caroline's Chevette, which he knew she needed that evening, followed the street from its origins at a city park out to its last suburban house, 5506. The builders had not yet put up the rest of the development, although there were signs they might: a half-finished road, red X's on certain trees. The finished houses were big, surrounded by healthy mature trees left standing during the building process, and sparse new lawns. There were in-ground swimming pools, bay windows, twin chimneys, landscaped lots large enough for that urban luxury, privacy. The smells of summer evening hung in the air: cut grass, warm asphalt, overblown roses, the sweet sweat of healthy toddlers. Lawn sprinklers whirled.

On the way home, Potter stopped at a restaurant with a public phone and directory. There was no listing for William Boylan.

"I needed the car," Caroline said stiffly to Potter when he returned. Her green eyes sparkled with resentment. "You knew I needed it tonight."

Potter didn't answer. Anything he said would only make it worse. Sadness welled up from his belly to his throat, choking him.

"I *told* you," Caroline said. Melissa, standing beside her mother, looked at him flatly. When he reached out to smooth her beautiful hair, she flinched.

Brendan slouched into the living room. It was the first evening he had been home in over a week; more and more he stayed at his friend Kelso's house, with Kelso's family. Potter had at first protested this, but Caroline had said wearily, "Oh, let him stay there. Why would he want to stay *here?*" and Potter had not fought her. He knew he was losing some quality essential for fighting, some fundamental vigor.

"Phone, Dad."

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"For me?"

Brendan's face twitched in disgust. "No. For Superman." He slouched out.

Potter walked on trembling legs to the extension in the bedroom. A girl's voice said, "Daddy? It's Jeanine." He recognized the voice; it had last sung "Happy Birthday" to him, sweet and tuneful. How had Brendan come to pass on the call? Whom had she asked for?

"Daddy?"

Potter closed his eyes and heard himself say, "Yes."

"Guess what? I won!"

"You did."

"Yes! You sound funny, Daddy. Are you okay?" The young voice radiated concern.

"I have a cold, Honey."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Anyway, I won! I played a wrong note in the first movement, you wouldn't believe how dumb, but I didn't let it rattle me and I played the second movement like we rehearsed, and I won! And one judge said I was the youngest to win in the violin division *ever!*"

"That's wonderful."

"Yes," the voice burbled, "and you should have seen Gary and Susie, they were jumping up and down in the first row and clapping like crazy, even Susie. Mom, too. Here she is."

"Bill?" said the voice Potter remembered, its huskiness and warmth as full of light as the child's. Potter could *see* it, that light: shimmering auroras, silver and pearl, behind his eyelids. He hung up.

For a long time he stood there, finally whispering, "No," but so softly no one else could hear.

"No what?" Melissa said. She had unaccountably appeared at his elbow. He looked at her, at the horrible flatness in her eyes that had drifted there out of some imbalanced chemical weather in her brain, out of Potter's and Caroline's misery, out of some unknown country that, Potter realized, he did not really believe Dr. Horacek would ever map.

"No nothing, baby," he said, and reached to gather her into his arms. Melissa kicked him and squirmed away, running from the bedroom. At the doorway she turned, her little face full of the anguished and pointless fury which modern medicine said was part of her illness, and spat.

"Don't touch me! I wish you weren't my Daddy!"

She whirled and was gone. Potter grabbed the phone and yanked the cord from the wall. With all the strength he had left, he hurled it across the room at the mirror over the dresser. Glass shattered and flew wildly in silver splinters of flashing light.

AT&T Subsidiary Repair Operator Number 21 claimed that the com-

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pany had already acted on Complaint #483-87A, cross-wired phones in the same digital decad, but would look into the situation yet again. Potter said that the address on file for the other digits did not exist, and possibly the digits did not either, and there would be nothing to look into. Repair Operator Number 21 did not reply.

Potter took to calling 645-2892 from his office, from the kitchen extension when there was no one else at home or the bedroom extension when there was, once from a pay phone outside Melissa's therapist's office. He never called twice at the same time of day; he never spoke. Jeanine or Connie or Bill or Gary would answer, and Potter would listen a moment and hang up. Susie never answered; Potter guessed she was too young, perhaps even a baby. Gary's voice had the huskiness of his mother's. Only Bill Boylan ever reacted with suspicion to the silence at the other end of the phone, and Potter imagined his suspicion to smell of protection, not fear. Connie and Jeanine answered liltingly—"Hel*lo?*"—Gary with offhand confidence. Often there was laughter in their voices, as if the phone had interrrupted some blithe conversation or on-going family joke.

On a Saturday night in late October, calling at 10:30 P.M. when Caroline had stormed out after a fight and Brendan had not been home for two weeks and Melissa had gone on one of her increasingly frightening rampages and then, exhausted, had fallen asleep, Potter heard two receivers lift simultaneously. Bill's voice said, "*Hel*lo," the first syllable heartier than the second, and Jeanine said "Hi there!" and then burst into laughter that echoed from what sounded like a dozen feminine young throats. A slumber party.

"Get off the phone, Honey," Bill said. "I got it."

"Yes, Daddy."

"Hello," Bill repeated to the silent Potter. And then, "Now you listen to me. I don't know who you are or what you think you're doing calling my family every few days like this, but you better cut it out now, buddy, or you'll wish you had. The phone company can put a tracer on this line. I've already spoken to them about it. Do this again and you'll be in deep shit. From both them *and* me, if I find out who and where you are. Got that?"

"Yes," Potter said, not caring if Boylan recognized his voice, if he connected the crossed-wires malfunction with this newer, less mechanical one. But apparently Boylan did not make the connection. In his world, Potter thought, malfunctions were separate, manageable. They did not mutate and cross-breed and turn cancerous, feeding on their own deformed tissues until the center itself could no longer hold.

"Scum," Boylan said, and hung up.

Potter put his own receiver down gently, as if it were alive.

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He gathered together all the photographs Melissa had decapitated, and put them into a 9 × 12 manila envelope. With them he folded one of Melissa's therapy reports, a heartbreaking document in prophylactic prose: "Subject systematically destroys toys in playroom environment. One-to-one observation reveals no symbolic preference in plaything destruction." Potter put into the envelope a notice from the bank stamped INSUFFICIENT FUNDS. He added a torn piece of foil from the packet of birth control pills he had found in Caroline's drawer and had left there, after a long sightless moment in which he felt the knife he had not minded at his actual vasectomy. He even put in a paint flake from the Buick.

He addressed the envelope in clear block letters:

MR AND MRS WILLIAM BOYLAN
5542 LAPHAM PARK ROAD
WINTHROP, NEW YORK

At the Post Office, he looked up the zip code for such of Lapham Park Road as existed. He was careful to include his return address. Five days later, the manila envelope was delivered to Potter's mailbox, stamped NO SUCH ADDRESS—RETURN TO SENDER.

So it would have to be the phone.

He stayed home from work on a Tuesday, when Caroline was at her part-time job and Brendan and Melissa at school. Just before he picked up the receiver, Potter had a moment of clarity, unwelcome as sudden nakedness. Why had he mailed the envelope? What had he hoped? To somehow poison the other, luminous world he could not have, or to send a cry of help for his own? He hated both alternatives, writhed in humiliation just thinking of them. Boylan's voice saying "Scum. . . . "

But as he had hoped, it was Connie who answered. That husky voice, vibrant with warmth. "Hello?"

"My name is Dave Potter. Listen, please don't hang up on me, Connie. You don't know me, but our phone lines were crossed a few months ago and I spoke to you and your family. Since then things here have just fallen apart, you can't know, I don't know how or why but I'm about at the end of my rope and I need to talk to you for a while. Just talk. I'm harmless to you, I swear it, and your house doesn't exist anyway so I couldn't come there to—" Potter stopped, appalled. What was he saying?

Connie was silent. Potter felt her bewilderment, coming over the phone line in waves. He clutched the receiver tighter.

"Please don't hang up. Please. I know how this must sound to you, but there isn't anything here like your family, your marriage, *nothing,* do you hear me, we can't do it anymore—" He realized he was shouting, made himself lower his voice.

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"Connie—"

"Please leave me alone," she said, and even through her fear and his grief some part of Potter's mind still registered that "please," a grace note grown so alien that it stunned him and he groaned.

"*Connie—*"

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I can't help you," and hung up.

Potter remained standing in his bedroom, listening to silence. After a while, it was replaced by a dial tone, and then by a high whining drone like wind in dead trees.

In January, after the holidays, Caroline asked Potter for a divorce. He didn't contest it; in New York State, there would have been little point. He and Caroline argued bitterly over financial and custody arrangements, but by Valentine's Day she was gone.

Potter moved into a two-bedroom apartment, to which he brought his children every other weekend and Wednesday nights.

Shortly before his share of the furniture arrived but after his phone had been installed, Potter surrendered to impulse and dialed 645-2892. Standing there in the bare wooden box with its sterile walls and cheap Scotch-guarded carpet, Potter felt his heart begin a slow hammering against his ribs, which kept up even after a voice answered.

"The number you have reached has been disconnected. The new number for that party is unlisted. Thank you for using AT&T."

In June, Melissa was taken off Ritalin by her doctor. Without the medication, her rages increased for a brief time, but then began to subside. It was decided at a tense conference of Potter, Caroline, Dr. Horacek, and the clinic staff that Melissa should repeat kindergarten at a public school. This announcement did not seem to upset her. "Okay," she said, not looking up from dressing her Cabbage Patch doll.

On a Friday afternoon the following October, Potter was driving in an unfamiliar part of the city. He had had a business appointment that had taken far longer than it should have. His watch said nearly 6:30, and he still had to pick up the circus tickets before the Ticketron closed and get to the bank before *it* closed. He needed a hefty wad of cash for tomorrow. Early, before the bank opened, he was driving Brendan upstate to visit two community colleges that were supposed to have strong programs in mechanical arts. The colleges were two hundred and fifty miles apart; they had appointments at the first one at 10:00 A.M. and the second at 4:00 P.M., and would spend Saturday night at a motel somewhere. Sunday afternoon was the circus for Melissa, and Potter hadn't gotten around to doing any laundry in two weeks. It would be tight, very tight. He drove with one hand drumming on the dashboard, leaning forward over the wheel to arrive at the Ticketron three inches earlier.

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He passed the intersection of Lapham Park Road.

Potter wrenched the wheel to the right. Before he had time to think about it, he was driving east on Lapham, away from the city park, past the row houses separated by narrow concrete driveways, past the 1950s ranches and split levels, to the old trees and new development where the road ended.

The builders had done a lot in fifteen months. The last house was now 5573. Beyond it, bulldozers and backhoes stood yellow and silent against the bloody Indian summer sunset, looming over stacks of lumber and bags of cement and spools of cable. Kids climbed on the bulldozer, shrieking at each other in delight. As Potter watched from his parked car, one of them, a small boy, climbed off the heavy equipment and wandered down the street to stare at the moving van in front of 5542.

The new owner was carrying in furniture himself, along with the uniformed movers. He balanced a hall table, silky amber-colored wood with a matching chair upholstered in rose, against his muscular chest. The chair, upside down on the table, slid a little. A woman ran lightly down the steps, smiling, and steadied the chair. She had sleek chestnut hair, bright blue eyes, and long slim legs in crisp jeans. Behind her a child appeared in the doorway, waddling on bare legs beneath a plastic diaper; an older girl dashed up behind the toddler and grabbed her before she could try to navigate the steps. The older girl grinned and shook her head, her long hair cutting the air. From around the corner of the house, Gary tentatively approached the neighbor boy and smiled shyly.

Potter started his engine, made a three-point turn, started back up Lapham Park Road. The hall table had had an underslung, open shelf instead of a drawer. He wondered if the table would stand in an upstairs hall or a downstairs one, and if the phone placed on it would be a desk model, a slimline, or some fancy custom job to match whatever the Boylans' idea of home decoration might be.

Potter pushed his foot down on the gas pedal. The bank closed in half an hour, the Ticketron an hour after that, and if he didn't get to the bank before it closed, he wouldn't be able to be on time for his trip with Brendan tomorrow. He stopped thinking about the phone. It had nothing to do with him; it never had. ●

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The
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"Stochasm" is his first
sale to *IAsfm*.

art: Ed Repka

by John Barnes

STOCHASM

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Take any repeated similar events—traffic accidents, stock transactions, baseball games—count and categorize them, and you get trends. Trends in nature don't run without limit; the hitter who is improving doesn't eventually bat one thousand, the rising stock does not become worth more than the GNP, every car on the road doesn't hit every other one. Every trend reverses—watch long enough, and there's a pattern to the reversals . . . and where a lot of things reverse all at once, there's a cusp.

It had started out as a game three years ago, something to amuse him while he waited for a job to run or when he needed a break. Danny had kept track of every exchange he had with Karen, categorizing them into Social, Sexual, Household Business, Affectionate, or Competitive, and rating each one plus, zero, or minus. He had not thought it would ever mean anything, but, as he had known they must, the patterns had appeared. Now he was fascinated.

In the last four months, Sexual and Competitive had run increasingly positive, Affectionate and Social more and more negative. Household Business had flexed up and down rapidly, the oscillations increasing in magnitude—the value of its first derivative was plunging down toward negative infinity. Based on past experience, every trend was due to reverse suddenly, any day now. Not that he could exactly talk about that to Karen.

He wondered if the upcoming social cusp had anything to do with it. Maybe everyone in the country was moving toward a personal cusp; maybe the whole weight of them added up to the social cusp. He pictured everyone moving along the curves, rolling along like marbles on a lumpy table top, all climbing up some big rise only to roll immediately off of it, colliding and scattering in random confusion.

The image was interesting enough to make him run through a fast set of calls on the net, finding an algebraic spreadsheet program; the telltale on the screen noted that he had committed himself for 1.49 newdollars. He flicked the approve key and quickly set up the marble model. Sure enough, if the number of marbles was large, and you knew their average speed and the shape of the lump, you could say how many marbles would roll off the lump in any one direction.

But of course you could never calculate which direction any particular marble would take. If he had taken the teaching job instead of going to work for the Bureau, this would have made a perfect classroom demonstration. And of course he'd have been classified mid-Thirties, and there wouldn't be this trouble with Karen. In fact, you could probably see that decision as another personal cusp . . . how would you model that? His fingers poised above the keys.

He heard the shower stop. He stored the results and logged off.

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As Karen came out of the bathroom, the property line indicator pinged; someone was coming up the front path. Danny peered out the curtain.

"Oh my god, he's here."

"Isn't that just like a Russian?"

"No. Querry." Danny dropped the curtain. "It's not like him—usually he's right in the slot for everything."

"Well," Karen said, "he's *your* boss—you'll have to handle him. I'm not even dressed yet."

She hurried back to the bathroom, a smoky swirl of bright colors hanging over her arm, the smears of color on her back showing off her muscles. She was going to wear the Appearance tonight, he realized. For a Thirty-three, that was a bit pre-drift, but this *was* a pretty boho occasion—a lot of women would be wearing it. Still, he'd never seen Karen in it—that was vaguely exciting. "Hey," Danny said.

"What?" She turned around.

"You look spiv."

"I know. And the expression on the span nowadays, gospodin, is magno."

"Magno?"

"You got it. And thank you. Now see about your boss." She ducked into the bathroom as the doorbell rang.

When Danny opened the door, Querry was facing the other way. "I think there's a brushfire down on the canyon side of your yard," he said. Danny rushed past him to look. There was no smoke or flame anywhere. His boss caught his elbow. "Keep going. Let's walk down that way. Need to talk away from Uncle Mike."

Because he was a Twenty-four, Danny had a big yard; by walking slowly, they could talk quietly for a long time without looking odd. "Quite a gathering tonight," Querry said.

"Mostly Karen's boho friends. This composer, Merva, is a Forty-seven, and there's going to be a bunch of those. The only things to the right of a Thirty-three will be you, me, Kendergill, and the Russian."

"Should be lively. I could use a little variety."

The older man was always saying things like that; it made Danny nervous, considering where they both worked. Querry, after all, was an Eleven, almost the brownest of the brown. His avant-garde interests should have been min.

Querry grinned at him. "Surely I didn't shock you."

Danny shook his head.

"Good. Tell me, Danny, how do you feel about the SA?"

"Uh . . . I don't understand the question?"

"Good answer. Now, how would you feel about a withdrawal of the Supervisory Authority? Imagine you're being polled ... ."

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"I think I'd like that."

"Wouldn't mind seeing some taterheads go home?"

Danny looked around. "Nope."

"Do you know how the great majority of Twenty-fours feel about the SA leaving?"

"Well, if we've got them classified right, probably the same as I do."

"Wrong. You're fringe five on this, Danny."

"Holy shit. I guess I'm really off drift. Where's the break?"

"At thirty-one. You're not even close. And you can imagine what it's like down at my end of the spectrum."

Danny nodded. It was only eight years since Reconstruction had ended and the Soviet troops had gone home. Officially, the Constitution had been restored, and the Supervisory Authority was only here "to prevent the development of a climate of militant anticommunism," but most bureaucrats still relied on the backup authority of SA. Almost nobody right of the Seventeens would be happy to see them go. "I guess people are used to them."

"Uh-hunh," Querry looked down, kicking the ground. "Now—second question: suppose we come up with a proposal to increase the number of classifications, say from the forty-six model to the one hundred three. How are you going to report out on that?"

Danny turned away. Something had caught the corner of his eye; he looked and saw a naked woman sunning herself on the rocks by the trail down in the canyon. He turned back to Querry. "Hmm. Speaking for the guys in Forecasting, I ought to love it. I suppose it might be a pain for Classification. How's it affect the subject we're talking about?"

"Good question. How do you think?"

"Well . . ." He scratched his head, stole another glance at the nude sunbather, let the equations and graphs dance in his mind a little, and then pulled his answer into shape. "Okay, I see it this way. Assuming you do a straight method split—just follow the procedures and take what you get, no detectable jiggering of the boundaries—you'll get a couple classifications that are, uh, livelier. People with, um, potato allergies, I guess you'd say, that reinforce each other that way. And some that like our Russian friends better, too. The whole thing will get more polarized, I guess."

"Which creates a demographic base for people who feel like we do. And of course with more classification interacting, everything gets more complex and less predictable in the long run, even though your short-run forecasts will be better. It won't be much, but it's a start." Querry turned back toward the house. "Time's getting on; the fire's out. Sorry I came so early—I saw the brushfire from the station. That was good work that

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you sent over, incidentally—I almost missed the train out here sending you your congratulations."

"Thanks. You can go on in and hang around in the living room—Karen's dressed by now. I'd like to walk around out here and do a little thinking."

"Sure."

"Oh," Danny said, turning to face the canyon again, "is Kendergill in this?"

Querry leaned in close to his ear. "Out. Way out. I'm afraid he's a more typical Twenty-four than you are. I'll invite you over soon and we'll talk then."

"Sure. Thanks for your help with the brushfire."

"Anytime." Querry turned and went up toward the house.

Danny took the trail down over the broken rock, further into the canyon. He was thinking about his talk with Querry, and had half-convinced himself that he had imagined the sunbather; by the time he reached the rocks, he was actually startled to find her.

"Uh," he said.

"Hi." She rolled over onto her stomach and looked up at him.

"Hello."

"You must be Danny Parana. Right-light?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Merva. I was down here pulling in some feels before the big shosho. You're the tanno Karen's legaled to. Right-light?"

"You've got it."

"You read the talk pretty true."

"Part of my job. I'm in the DPB. You're talking stock high forties boho slang; I see it all the time. I'm a little less tanno than your standard Twenty-four."

"Still pretty down and brown for most of this crowd; half these Guy Jenas have never seen the brown side of Thirty, not even their parents. That Green Jean was your boss?"

"Right again." Danny felt a little prickle on the back of his scalp; given Merva's classification, she was almost certain to be sympathetic, but once you got up over Forty-four people tended to be eccentric and unreliable. There was no telling what she might do or who she might talk to.

"So there's gonna be something beyond Forty-seven. And you're trying to get the breffs out."

"Not exactly beyond," Danny said, sitting down. "We'll probably resplit the whole system. It's high time anyway—the socioeconomic mix is a lot more complicated now than it was right after the war."

"And that's good for Forecasting and bad for Classification. I'm afraid I heard the whole thing." She smiled at his surprise. "You seem to ride

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the drift pretty true, like Karen said. I can speak straight English—hell, I have a masters in lit. I just wanted to know what I was dealing with before I talked too much." She rolled over again; she was about a shade darker brunette than Karen, but slimmer, and her skin was drier and looked older. She wasn't as pretty as Karen, but there really was something distinctive about the way she looked. "So how's a Twenty-four marry a Thirty-three?"

"She used to be a Twenty-eight. She's been shifting for some years."

"Lure of the boho, hunh?"

"I guess so. That and getting some use out of my rising income; after Thirty-one you don't work outside the home if you're a woman."

"*I* do." She stretched and yawned; Danny admired the way her muscles played under her skin.

"Yeah. Working outside starts again at Thirty-eight."

"You've really got the system down." She rolled over, sat up, and smiled at him. "What can you tell me about me?"

"Not much. Forty-seven's the catchall classification—"

"Right-light. See these here?" She lifted her breasts in her hands.

"Uh—"

"Stop staring, brownie, can't you afford to buy any dirty pictures?" She turned away, lying face down on the rock. He thought of saying something, maybe an apology, but it was obvious that she just wanted him to go away.

It was getting to be time for the guests to show up anyway; Danny went back up the trail. As he came around the bend up above her sunbathing rock, he heard voices and looked back. She was talking to three men, all in very drifto drapes.

That explained it. Among high-forties, rep and conn-up were vital—fraternizing brownward was risky. He smiled to himself; if Kendergill or one of the other people from the office had turned up, he'd have been equally obnoxious.

When he got back to the house, Querry was talking with Johnny Kendergill in one corner, Karen was talking with two high-Thirties on the couch, and a Russian major was sitting quietly in the corner armchair, thumbing through the Thirty-three edition of *Time*. Danny headed for him; might as well get this over with.

"Danny Parana. Karen's husband."

"Hello. I am Major Vjarnyk. Quiet so far."

"Most of the crowd isn't here yet. It'll get livelier when some of the bohos show up."

"No doubt. Is there a quiet corner to which I can go?"

"Uh—"

"I don't like to intrude. If I can sit somewhere where I won't interfere—"

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"Well, you *are* a guest—"

"By courtesy. I am trying to return it."

Karen joined them. "I see you've met our major-for-the-night. Found any common interests?"

"I think we share a taste in books," Vjarnyk said, gesturing at Danny's shelves.

"Oh, isn't that nice," Karen said. There was a long silence. "You know," she added, "we don't get to see many Russians, out here away from town."

Vjarnyk smiled. "You need not see much of me. I was hoping to arrange to be out of your way."

Danny found Vjarnyk a novel. "At least something is on track," he muttered to Karen as they went to the kitchen together.

"Ha. Typical breff. Now he's got himself established as a good guy."

Danny shrugged. "Yeah. But it's nice while it lasts."

"Try not to be seen with the breff too much. People think you're brown enough as it is." She handed him a bowl of green goo. "This goes next to the fried turnip sticks."

She seemed to be a little drunk already—she certainly smelled of gin. Danny decided not to say anything. The doorbell rang.

It was Merva, with her friends; Danny wasn't sure which was which, but their names were Plastic, Obsidian, Quagmire, Pontius Pilate, and Coathanger. One of them called him Bob.

At eight o'clock, when the city power was turned off, they lit the candelabra. By now Karen was dug in with a few of her high-Thirties friends in the corner; the men all had one-syllable names, like Ted, Jim, Cliff, Jake, Zach. Danny had never noticed that before; he said something to Johnny Kendergill about it.

"Oh, sure. Watkins and Tucker did a study on that. Too weak to have any predictive value. But it *is* there. What're your kids named?"

"I don't have any."

Kendergill shook his head. "And you're a Twenty-four, and more than thirty years old. Maybe you ought to reclass up a little—you're definite fringe five on that."

Danny let himself smile too widely, as if he were about to laugh. "Oh, I kind of enjoy the sensation."

"Seriously, Danny, I mean, that's why you ought to reclass. You want to fit, don't you?"

"What, and make it easy for you guys?"

Kendergill laughed nervously. "What's gotten into you?"

Well, he felt like bragging, and everyone would hear about it at the Wednesday weekly. "Can you keep a secret for a few days?"

It would have been more reassuring if Kendergill hadn't nodded so vigorously, but Danny told him anyway. "A whole gang of second deriv-

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atives—eighty-four of 'em—are within a standard deviation of zero right now. Almost a hundred more will pass through it within six weeks. The General Model's inflecting hard—a major cusp."

"Big?"

"Biggest one since the Occupation went home. Maybe even bigger—no good estimate yet, but it might be as big as the war itself, though probably not as visible—the first partial derivatives are all a lot smaller, so the cusp is more of a gradual hill than a sharp spike. But it sure is big, *and* close."

Kendergill whistled appreciatively; Danny imagined two lemmings talking about how the beach under their feet meant something was surely changing . . . the rattle of marbles on a lumpy tabletop. "Now, for six extra points," he added, "figure out what difference my telling you will make in the ultimate outcome."

"That's your job, Forecasting." Kendergill laughed a little too long and a little too hard.

Nobody actually turned and stared, but Danny realized his work partner was drunker than he should be. "Uh, Johnny, you want to get some fresh air?"

"Just getting nice in here. When's the music?"

"About another hour," Danny said. He looked around, but didn't see anyone free except Querry, heading for the bathroom, and of course Vjarnyk, happily engrossed in an old Eric Ambler.

"Hey, tanno, where y'pack the magno drool?" Merva said, behind Danny. "Need a little hot-loose-and-smooth just this immede." She threw an arm around him.

Kendergill winced and looked away; Danny led Merva to the kitchen. "Thanks for the rescue. How about Cafe Royale?"

"Perfect. That jean's pretty brown."

"You might say that. He's my partner on most projects—classification man. He's good—remembers every paper he's ever read."

"He's stock Twenty-four, isn't he? You don't like him."

"Yeah."

"Are you thinking of upclassing?" She put an arm around him again; the coffee was hot now, so they added the brandy. She stayed snuggled in close; he noticed that the Appearance really did feel like nothing. "Keep your hand off my ass," she whispered. "I just wanted to ask if there's any way I can help you and Mr. Green Jeans."

"Sorry." He moved his hand up to the small of her back. "It depends. You could let me know what you have in mind, but not here."

"Afraid of your legal?"

"You could say that. She's got nosy relatives. You never know where

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her Uncle Mike will turn up—the browner the household, the better he likes it."

She turned on the water and let it run hard and loud. "Better?"

"Yeah. I'm sure you can help." He swept her into his arms and breathed in her ear. "Tell Karen you like that rock for sunbathing. We're pretty sure it's not eared. I walk down there a lot."

"Good," she whispered back. Unexpectedly, she kissed him, then slipped out of his arms and through the door. He found himself facing Major Vjarnyk. "Uh, hi."

"I came for a glass of water." Danny handed him a glass. Vjarnyk turned the water down to half and filled it. "You have a good collection—Ambler, Fleming, Le Carré."

"You're welcome to borrow any of them."

"The one I am reading would be pleasant to finish. I am flying to Washington this week—I will mail it to you, probably from there."

"Fine." Danny knew he must sound a little nervous, but he already had a perfect cover for that. "I hope you're enjoying the evening. Have you tried any of the snacks?"

"A few. The little pieces of corn-on-the-cob—"

"Yeah, it's a traditional American dish—"

"Yes. Very common in the USSR nowadays. Soldiers that serve with the Supervisory Authority bring it back—you can find it in most restaurants in Moskva." The major took a long sip of water. "You know, I have run into a certain strange notion among Americans; they are aware, I suppose, that corn on the cob was fed only to pigs among the people of, say, my father's generation. Some of them still have the notion that we are uncomfortable eating it." He drank again. "Yours is very tasty."

Danny leaned back against the sink. "Well, things change."

"Quite a bit." Vjarnyk gave him an unexpectedly broad grin. "You know, I have a son back home. I am divorced—he lives with his mother. She writes to tell me he is running with hooligans, *stilyagi*—only now they call themselves 'Forty-sevens.' "

Without having to force it, Danny laughed.

"While we are talking about this system, there is one thing I would like to ask," Vjarnyk said. "Please do not answer if it is too personal." Danny nodded. "You and your wife are different classes. Classifications, I mean. Is that not odd?"

Danny nodded, sipping his drink. "We're both what we call fringe five—on the edge of our classifications. The household consumption pattern is basically Twenty-four and the opinion matrix is pretty close to stock Thirty-three. Yeah, my department doesn't like it much."

"I would not think that anyone would. The system, I mean."

"It has its advantages. You know who you are more now than you used

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to. Remember, we didn't create this structure—it was there before the war. We just discovered it and reinforced it." By now Danny's drink was cold, but he took a big gulp anyway.

"Discovered it how?"

"Something we call a Euclidean cluster algorithm."

Vjarnyk smiled again. "Sorry, that is not what I meant to ask. How do you know that there are only forty-seven kinds of people?"

"Oh. Um, well, let's see. If you have something—oh, let's say shoes. Some people like high heels a lot, some hate them, some are in between. Right? It forms a continuum; you could imagine it as a line, and everybody falls somewhere on it. Now, if you add another dimension—let's say feelings about property taxes—you could plot the two against each other. And presumably all people would fall somewhere on that graph. Well, it turns out that they aren't evenly distributed; they're in clumps. Those clumps—the clusters—are the 'natural' classifications that we look for. Of course we use many more than two dimensions, almost a thousand in fact. And we use a complicated statistical program, not eyeballing, to draw the cluster boundaries." He finished his drink and set it down. "I'm glad our books entertain you. I hope you'll enjoy the music." He glanced at his watch and turned back to the sink.

Vjarnyk nodded and went back out. Danny rinsed a couple of glasses. It wasn't Vjarnyk the man or even Vjarnyk the Russian that bothered him, he decided; it certainly wasn't Communism—he'd been happy enough to get his Party card, and he'd even been thinking of running for County Central Committee. Something else entirely. . . .

Coming out of the kitchen, he almost collided with Cliff and Karen. "Danny! There you are. I think Merva needs some help setting up the keyboard rig."

"Sure."

"That is, if Ivan's done with his math lesson," Cliff added.

Karen giggled. As Danny turned away, he saw Cliff's hand slide under Karen's filmy Appearance skirt. The kitchen door swung shut.

Actually, Danny's help wasn't needed. Quagmire, a tall thin black man, had the keyboard rig up already; it was fun, though, to talk with him about it—there were some really clever tricks in there to make up for the unreliability of the batteries. Danny relaxed and began to enjoy himself; after a while, though, Plastic (or was it Obsidian?) came by and asked Quagmire if the brown was rubbing off on him.

"Well, fun talking with you, but I gotta get back to my own span or they'll cat my rep to shreds. K'neech, Danny."

"Yeah, I gotta go brown-on myself," Danny said. "K'neech, Quag." He wandered off; as he drifted by Querry, his boss plucked his sleeve, nodding toward Quagmire and the rest of the bohos.

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"You certainly work a lot closer to the field than I do."

"Yeah. Well, being married to Karen helps." She was still in the kitchen with Cliff.

"Yeah. What did that Russian talk with you about?"

"Work, a little. In real abstract terms. And he gave me the old standard Kremlin kiss-of-sympathy—you know, I eat corn on the cob, I have a wife and kid, I love dogs, baseball, and Kurt Vonnegut. All that."

"I checked his file out before I came. Nice enough guy, kind of gone native. Volunteered to stay here; dates some American girls—dates, I mean, not the usual."

"That's good."

"Yeah. Listen, when the uproar dies down you want to come to dinner next week? Maybe some poker too?"

"Sure."

Merva joined them. "Well, Quagmire gave you a good rep-out. How's my noisemover?"

"Real fine," Danny said. "Magno."

"Well, the feels are good—I want to get this little shosho going."

Danny nodded. "Hey, everybody. Showtime in just a few minutes. Pull up a chair if you can find one."

"Coathanger went out to fetch in Karen and Cliff," Merva added, quietly. Then, turning to Querry, she asked, "So do you read Boise Sound?"

"I love it," Querry said.

Merva shook her head and made a face. "Pretty soon, everyone's going to be a Forty-seven. Who's going to pay the taxes to support us?"

As Querry, Kendergill, and Danny sat down, Cliff and Karen came back in; Karen's body paint, under the Appearance veils, was smeared. Danny got up, vaguely thinking he might grab Cliff and start something, stepping over a couple of sprawled bohos on his way to get to them. Karen caught his eye, seeming to dare him.

Behind him, there was a ripple of scales being run, first horns, then strings, then bass, finally all three woven together. Merva was already seated, running her fingers lightly over the keyboard. "Well, jeans, the feels are right—big sposs-bo for Quagmire and Danny—magno job on the rig." There was a spatter of clapping; Danny looked around, blinking. Everyone was looking at him. He went back to Querry and Kendergill and sat down.

Merva smiled, resting her hands on the keyboard. "This is a piece I've written under commission," she said. "I call it the Peace Suite—its concert debut is next year, on the fifteenth anniversary of the Treaty of Frankfurt. It's in five parts; I call them War, Peace, Truth, Lies, and Circular Rhythm and Blues."

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Vjarnyk, still surprisingly courteous, had gotten up and come over to join the crowd.

To Danny's surprise, Merva's music was perfectly clear to him, not as drifto as he'd been dreading—"War" was a dark, thundering, threatening concise summary of three terrifying months when he had been seventeen.

"Peace" was mistitled—it was despair, defeat, ruin. Some of the Forty-sevens were openly in tears; Querry's face was rigid, and even Kendergill quit playing with his fingers and listened intently. Vjarnyk squirmed. Yet at the end of it there was a turn—an unexpectedly lighter, more hesitant last chord, a twist that apparently came from nowhere, still somehow implicit in all that preceded it.

A long, slow sigh from everyone broke the silence between the parts. "Truth" was almost doctor's office background music; Danny first thought that it wasn't as good as the others, then that it was good but didn't fit.

Vjarnyk stood up; he stood through the rest of "Truth."

Merva finished the part and sat without moving, staring at him. "Proceed, if you like," he said. "I am not a censor."

"Then why did you stand, breff?" Merva asked.

"Respect. Simple respect. I am sorry that it seemed a threat."

"What the hell else did you expect it to look like?" Merva said. "You knew what was in that piece. I saw that in your face. You're here in uniform, breff. What else could you mean?"

Vjarnyk started to speak, stopped, tried again. "I—I am sorry. I was moved. I understood. The inversion and the Boise counterpoint—they still did not hide that melody."

Querry snapped his fingers—and suddenly tears filled his eyes. "Hadn't heard *that* since the war. God, what were the words . . ."

Vjarnyk turned to him. "I am not sure, but I remember seeing them once. In the British People's Republic it is a monarchist song, but here, I think, it is merely an expression of national culture—"

"But, since you heard it, the censors will never pass it," Merva said.

Vjarnyk flushed. "The board would have little choice—"

"I'm sure," she said. "Do you see any reason for me to go on with this?"

"I would like to hear. These people would like to hear. I will not intrude again. I apologize."

The room was quiet. Karen and Cliff were whispering to each other; her hand was on Cliff's thigh, brushing back and forth, teasing him. Danny could let Vjarnyk off the hook, but there was no special reason to save Karen's party.

"I apologize," Vjarnyk said again. "I cannot speak for your own broadcast censors; they are Americans like yourselves. But I do know that there is no law against anything of this kind in a private home. Please do go on." He looked around the room; Merva sat quietly, her fingers

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drumming on the top of the rig's CPU box. No one looked at him except Danny.

Then the Russian looked back at him without expression, directly into his eyes, and said softly, "This 'tradition' of having one of us at every gathering has gone on far too long. The war and Reconstruction, after all, are over. There is no law—only custom—that says I must be here."

For a long minute, his mind was blank. Finally, Danny stood up. "Get out of my house."

Almost smiling, Vjarnyk nodded and turned to go.

"Get out," Danny said again. "And since he's leaving, so is everyone else."

Vjarnyk stopped, not looking back. "I have just said that that is not necessary. Surely you will not spoil the evening—"

"It's spoiled already," Merva said. "You've been told to lift, breff. Make k'neech, Guy Jeans—Danny is right-light on this one."

As the guests grabbed their things, Vjarnyk approached Danny. "About the book—"

"Leave it here. I don't like you touching my stuff." Danny watched him out the door, up the path, till he disappeared in the shadows.

In a few minutes only Danny, Karen, Cliff, Querry, and Merva were left, carrying the plates and glasses into the kitchen and letting them rattle and bang at random into the sink. Danny threw in some soap powder and turned on the water; he jumped when they crashed again, sliding into a lower pile. Some suds had splashed onto his tunic. He dabbed at it with a towel, turned off the water, and went back out.

Merva and Querry were talking by the door; on the couch, Cliff was saying something to Karen. She looked up at Danny, her face pale and set. It was ruined for her, no matter what—she wouldn't get invited to anything on the span for some time. Danny waited until she met his eyes.

"Anyone want to walk down into the canyon, look at the moon or something?" He already knew his friends would accept; by the time he'd get back, Karen would be gone with Cliff.

There were still a few candles burning, and the front door was hanging open, when he returned to the house. After his talk with Querry and Merva, he was nervous and excited—doing the dishes might be a good way to unwind.

Karen had already done them; they were neatly arranged on the drying rack. Somewhere his mind counted off, two shelves of glasses, each five rows by eight columns, two slots empty, seventy-eight glasses. The average must have been almost exactly two glasses per person.

He peeped into the bedroom as quietly as he could; she was asleep on top of the covers, still in the Appearance, the makeup now blotched with

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sweat, staining the veils. He rocked back on his heels, looking down at the floor.

When he checked the bottles, consumed liquor worked out to very close to three drinks per person. Obviously that was an average, like the glasses. Almost before he knew it, he was sitting at the terminal, trying to work out a simple model that would account for those two almost-perfect integer ratios. He knew, of course, that there were other things, bigger things, he could be working on—but there was an elegance here in the small number of variables and the startling simplicity of the result. If he could express the process in just a few simple rules, perhaps only four or five equations, *that* would reveal the relevant dynamics behind the aggregate result.

His fingers slashed and pounded at the keys. He gazed into the screen, rejecting one, two, many models. It was getting later and later, but he knew he'd get it eventually.

Patterns can't be observed effectively from inside. Only from a distance, in time or space, can you really peg down what was going on. And what you find won't bear much resemblance to the view from inside the pattern—that, after all, is the whole fascination. ●

ON HOMO REPTILIS

Sometimes I feel the age
of the great leathery lizards
has returned with a vengeance.

Beneath a glossy urban sheen
I see them all about me:
rapacious and cold of eye,

small-brained and indifferent
to all but their appetites.
As arsenals and asylums fill

I feel the night thicken,
and with others of my kind,
bemused and warm-blooded,

I flee the implacable street,
wondering if we can survive
both the ice and the heat.

—Bruce Boston

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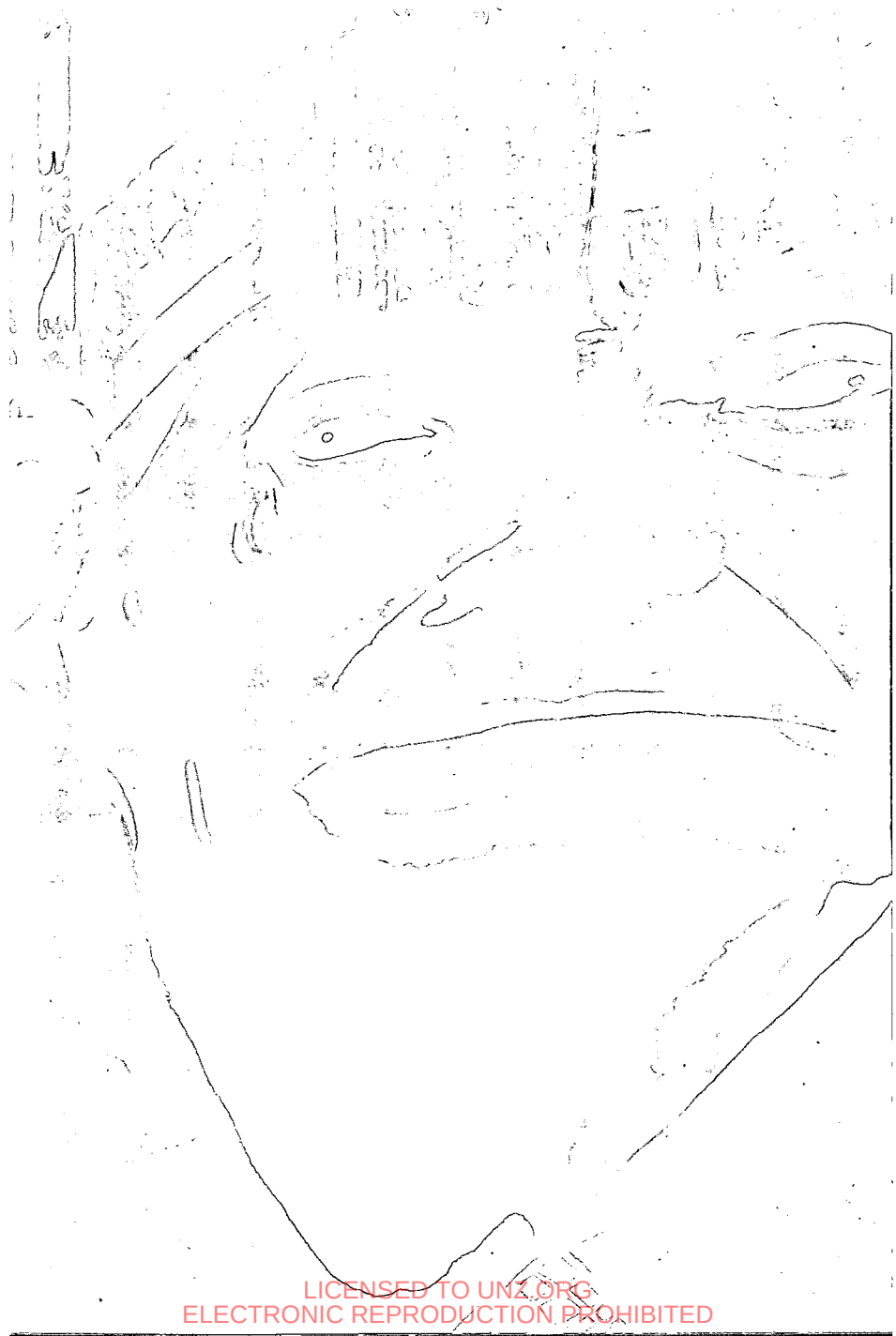

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DREAMWOOD

by Cherry Wilder
art: Laura Lakey

The author tells us: "I was born and educated in New Zealand, land of snow-capped mountains and statues of Queen Victoria. Later I was transported to New South Wales, and have now fetched up in West Germany with my husband and our two daughters who are all German citizens. All this has given me a certain sympathy for islands, rim worlds, aliens, and lonely people. I have recently completed a fantasy trilogy: The Rulers of Hylor. My short stories verge towards Science Fiction rather than fantasy. I enjoy altered states and other worlds."

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In the green heart of the wood, he comes to a grove of birch trees with trunks of black and silver and loose light-green foliage, beautiful as young girls. He is young, strong, free . . . the old men are vanquished. He can manage the wood far better than the others who dispute his tenure. By God, he is straightened out at last, and he has done it with love, with caring, without violence. He takes great joy in the leaves under his feet, the declinations of the path, the way the light falls upon the trunks of the birch trees. Beyond them he can see the forest, full of strange dark conifers. He sends forth his creative power: the cedar tree waits for him. He is carrying pine planks under his arm. There is Laurel, best and brightest, Apollo's bride; she comes to him, smiling, takes his hand, he can feel her hand in his. ". . . dearest of all . . ." she says at last, but it might be "clearest of all . . ."

She lets his hand fall; shrugs free, still smiling, when he puts his arm around her shoulders. Then, raising a hand in greeting, she walks off to join the two other men who have come through the dark fir trees. She turns back to him as if she felt his distress and calls: "It is the search theme! Register all this!"

He is alone again, still heading for the cedar tree. He sees a child, a little kid of about seven in a blue padded jacket with a hood, playing in a patch of sunlight. He knows this is not the child they are searching for . . .

The widow, Anna Hay Gordon, did not return to the New England house for more than a year. She drove up alone in the fall, turning abruptly into their overgrown access road, hearing the long grass slap against the sides of the new station wagon. She came up to the metal gate that Wallace had had put in before he died; her heart missed a beat, she trod on the brake, and felt the car slide a fraction. A tall man in a gray-and-blue checkered shirt was inside the gate, fumbling with the mailbox. He was tall, grey-haired, loose-limbed, and the shirt, surely the *shirt* . . . yet he was no ghost. He ran off awkwardly into the autumn trees beside the drive as she heaved the big wagon up to the gate. He was not Wallace, he was nothing like him. This man was ungainly, almost lame.

Anna unclamped her hands from the wheel and peered up the drive. A strange man at the house? She saw a red car parked beyond the tank stand, and the mystery was solved. Sam, her stepson, had people at the house. It was tactless, but Sam Gordon *was* tactless. He had brought up odd visitors in the old days. Very odd, some of them. The rock group, the two much-wanted Weatherpersons, the draft-dodging boys en route to Canada . . . Now Sam was harboring some old guy who had run off through the trees wearing—she was sure of it—one of Wallace's shirts.

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Anna dragged herself out of the driver's seat. Sam's voice creaked through the intercom on the gatepost.

"Anna? Anna?"

"Let me in, Sam!"

The gate swung open with difficulty; damn them, why didn't these freaks ever cut the grass! She went barreling down the drive, and passed the man in the shirt taking the path to the back door, through the Japanese maples. Sam was standing ankle-deep in leaves before the house. He was full of ill-controlled excitement, swinging his long arms like a gorilla.

Anna switched off her engine and watched him. Sam was growing older, if not precisely growing up. What would he be now? Thirty-five? Soon his gangling good looks would fade, would harden into an untidy middle age. Already he looked like a lecturer, not a student. She saw a girl come down the steps of the house, saw how neat she was, a chestnut-haired girl in a green divided skirt and some kind of a white jacket.

"Hey, you gave us a scare!" said Sam.

He turned to the girl. "It *is* Anna!" he said. "No sweat."

His tone was placatory. He made a quick introduction without looking away from the girl, whose name was Laurel Weiss. Anna could not smile, and neither could the girl, Laurel. She said: "We have a security problem, Ms. Gordon. We're hiding from the press. Did you stop in Rexford?"

"Nope!" said Anna. "But I damn near turned around and drove back there and got the police. I saw a strange man at my mailbox, wearing one of my late husband's shirts."

"For Christ's sake, Anna," said Sam, waving his arms. "He *needed* the shirt. . . ."

A third visitor came down off the porch. He was about forty-five years old, and heavily built. His nose had been broken at some time; he wore a turtle-neck sweater and tracksuit pants. He nodded politely to Anna and murmured to the girl, Laurel.

"How many people do you have in my house, Sam?" demanded Anna. "What kind of a circus are you putting on this time?"

"You don't understand . . ." Sam and Laurel spoke together.

The big man, the security guard, smiled pleasantly; Anna realized that he liked the look of her. It was a lonely assignment up here in the autumn woods. He grinned and slapped Sam on the back and came to open the car door.

"Mayhew," he said. "I'm Chet Mayhew, Ms. Gordon. We should go inside. Hey . . . let me get that bag. You'll see . . ."

There was something very sane and comforting about Mayhew.

"Come on in," Mayhew said. "Come on in and meet our friend Mr. Brown."

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Anna followed him in a dream. They all trooped up the steps, across the porch and into the big living room. A fire was burning; there was a pleasant whiff of coffee and bacon, but the place had been well-aired. The vases were filled with leaves and pods; the slip covers were on the chairs and the couch. All that she had planned to do and dreaded doing a little in this poor house had already been done.

The man in Wallace's shirt sat at the table, turning the pages of a Sears Catalogue. Anna remembered another dream, clear and cruel, in which Wallace came back from the dead subtly changed, easier to love. The man at the table had a long fair face, the beginnings of a beard. His large hands were unsteady. She had never expected to see him again. He was one of their oldest friends; he had come from the ends of the earth. He was Oleg Anton Kirrilow. Poet. Translator. Dissident. He stared at her, opening his blue eyes very wide; his lips moved soundlessly.

"Oleg!"

As she went to him, the girl Laurel said in a warning voice: "He is under treatment. . . ."

"My dear friends," whispered Oleg. "My dear friends Wallace Gordon and . . . and . . ."

"Anna," she said.

She sat down beside him and took one of his large moist hands.

"Anna!" he said triumphantly. "Yes! Anna, the new wife. Anna!"

"You got out," she said. "They let you go."

"They insisted upon it!" he said. "It's wonderful to see you. I was expecting you every minute. Where is Wallace?"

She did not bother to look at Sam and the others. She took it upon herself to protect Oleg from the shock.

"He's very sick," she said, "but I know he'd be so glad . . . so happy to see you in this house at last. Remember how we spoke of this place when we met in Zagreb?"

"The New England house," said Oleg, "the house in Maine, deep in the woods. We sang that old song . . . you . . . was it you, Anna, who sang that old student song to me?"

"Yes!" cried Anna.

And they burst out singing together, two friends, two lost unhappy creatures, two birds in the wilderness:

"Riding down from Bangor, on an eastern train,
After weeks of hunting in the woods of Maine . . ."

The others laughed and applauded. Oleg drew breath and shook his head from side to side.

"Forgive me," Oleg said. "Forgive me, Anna. I think . . ."

"What is it?"

"Wallace is dead?"

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"Yes," she said in a low voice. "It's been more than a year now. But what I said is true. He *would* be so pleased to see you here. Our house is yours."

"It went very quickly," Oleg said. "I was flown from Zürich, from a clinic in Zürich. At the plane I was received by the doctor and by Sam . . . I met Sam at last."

Sam came to lay a hand on Oleg Kirrilow's shoulder. Anna managed to smile. She caught the eye of Laurel Weiss. She was a little ashamed . . . she had taken the girl for a nurse or social worker, one of Sam's girls, helping out.

"Dr. Weiss?" she said.

"Yes, Ms. Gordon?"

"Could we all do with some coffee?"

"Chet!" ordered the doctor crisply, "How about some coffee for Ms. Gordon? She has come a long way, driving from Mexico."

"Stay where you are, Mr. Mayhew," said Anna.

She sprang up and went into the kitchen—her own contrary holiday kitchen with the rubble drain that had to be cossetted and the battered electric stove that had cooked so many turkey dinners. My God, she thought, Oleg is here to stay, we can keep Thanksgiving here, maybe, and Christmas. She had never thought to do that any more; she had thought of the house in the woods as a dead place, dead along with Wallace. She stood at the sink bench, gazing out into the woods, and Sam came to stand beside her, whistling a little old popular song that she could not place. The coffee had begun to percolate, banging against the lid of the pot.

"What does the government think of all this?" she asked.

"They de-briefed him already," said Sam. "He spent a day with them in New York. Oh, there's no personal interest in Oleg . . . they just wanted the names of other dissidents at the fancy political booby-hatch he was in. He has to report to them now and then. And not talk to the press."

"You mean to say Mayhew is *not* a government man?"

"Retired," said Sam. "He's a security guard at Latimer, in the Clinic. Laurel figured we needed him."

The name of the College where Sam worked had been taboo in the house for so long that Anna almost turned her head to make sure they were alone. Wallace had despised Latimer. Once triggered off he would vituperate against its faculty, its Medical Research Clinic, its publications, to the point of madness. Now the angry voice was still forever. Anna said shakily, "Laurel works at the clinic?"

"Sure," said Sam. "They do fantastic things. Oleg is responding to the treatment."

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"I hope so," said Anna. "Sam, what about your own work? I'm sorry I haven't been keeping up. Do you have tenure?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "You don't have to worry. This counts. I'll write an article on this work with Oleg. I'm working on . . . oh, a whole heap of things . . ."

She laughed.

"How's Frances?" asked Sam. "How are the kids?"

Sam loved Frances, his half-sister, Anna's own child. As a difficult boy of thirteen he had been "straightened out," not for the last time, by her birth; he had watched devotedly over her childhood. Anna was swept away suddenly by memories of the good times they had had here, right here in this house in the woods. When Wallace was working well on one of the history projects; when Sam was in school; when Fran was a little kid in a pink down parka, feeding the birds . . .

"They are all fine," she said. "They send love to you. I hear nothing but Uncle Sam, Uncle Sam down in Mexico. Very patriotic."

"Hey, I *saw* her!" cried Sam. "I must tell Laurel. I saw Fran in the wood. It could be a personal construct, one of the images we've been waiting for!"

"What are you talking about? You saw *Fran*?"

"In my dream," he said patiently. "I saw her as a kid, playing out there in the woods in her blue anorak . . ."

"Pink," said Anna. "It was pink. I was just thinking . . ."

But Sam had gone striding off into the living room to tell pretty Dr. Weiss his dream. Good heavens, thought Anna, is she his *analyst*? There was a burst of excited laughter from the other room, she heard the bass note of Oleg Kirrilow joining in: group therapy of some kind. She remembered the name of the old song Sam had been whistling; it was called "My Dreams Are Getting Better All The Time."

When she went in with the coffee they all fell silent, but their faces, turned towards her, were so cheerful that she could have wept with relief. Surely this was better than her planned retreat in the cold house, going about with gritted teeth sorting Wallace's things.

"Sit here, Ms. Gordon," said Laurel Weiss.

She sat between Oleg and the doctor. Oleg filled the old brown armchair comfortably, but seemed to find it difficult to relax. He talked well, trying to catch up with the last eight years since they had all met in Zagreb. His manner was halting; she found herself listening hard, prompting, giving him a few forgotten names and topics. When he asked questions, she took care to be precise and clear and not to take too long with her answers. She knew instinctively that he must not be over-burdened "with new material," as Wallace would have said. Just as instinctively, she lied about Wallace, about the tirades and the anxieties of his last years,

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but she did this with some hope. Eventually, if Oleg were to stay and to get better, she might bring out a truer picture. He was one of the few persons in the world who might understand the historian's defeat, the nightmare of ill-health.

"I could bring no papers out," said Oleg. "Not a scrap. There was so much that might have been useful for the biography."

"Not to worry," said Anna. "We will take some notes together."

She pressed his hand again. "Ah, to have you here . . ."

"Sam," he said, "Sam wants to write it . . ."

"Well," she temporized, "it is something to think about."

Anna realized that Sam and Mayhew had melted away. Only the doctor remained, quiet as a mouse. When Oleg excused himself to go to the bathroom, Laurel Weiss reached out smoothly towards a brown box that lurked on the coffee table, not really hidden by a bowl of leaves. She grinned at Anna.

"You can speak off the record at any time," she said. "This sliding contact is best."

"I hate being recorded," said Anna. "I hate it even more in my own house when I am talking to an old friend."

"We know the situation," said Laurel. "Believe me, Ms. Gordon, our only interest in Kirrilow is clinical, as a man suffering from loss of memory, partially drug induced. The whole program here is directed towards his rehabilitation, using a particular spectrum of new techniques. You are providing the things we cannot give: memories, peer contact, partnering . . ."

"Things you can't give?" asked Anna.

"We know that you and Kirrilow were lovers," said Laurel Weiss. "He would benefit from . . ."

Anna burst out laughing. "I wonder how you know *that*?"

"Please don't be embarrassed . . ."

"Some people *are* going to be embarrassed," said Anna. "Some people are going to be hurt, Dr. Weiss. How can gossip and family . . . arrangements help Oleg? You are barking up too many wrong trees!"

"Hey, what a great image!" said the girl, smiling more winningly than ever. "We *do* know, Ms. Gordon . . . Anna . . . We know it from the dreams, from Kirrilow's own dreams. He has immense creative power . . . he has helped us create the dreamwood."

"You're studying dreams?" Anna asked lamely.

She remembered a report on "dream therapy" that Sam had been unwise enough to show Wallace. No, he had showed him an article he had published, and this report on dream work at the university clinic had been on a neighboring page. It had received a blistering criticism, along with the article. Wallace raged and sneered ever afterwards;

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dreams and dreaming were black-listed, like so many other topics, and like the names of so many men and women. Anna thought of the interviews with literary reporters and student editors, of the poor guys from Archive Films who lost days of work when the interviewer insisted on slipping in the question about Marcuse.

"We are *sharing* our dreams, Anna," said Oleg Kirrilow from the doorway.

He advanced into the room with a more certain gait, his eyes shining. He spoke in Russian; she thought he was quoting from a poem. Laurel Weiss smiled again, pressed Anna's arm with a glance at the recorder, and slipped away.

"I don't have enough Russian," said Anna. "I am not the Russian expert."

He grinned and returned to his chair.

"Anna," he said. "The *new* wife, Anna."

"What is this dream-stuff?"

"What I said. It is a game, I think, not much more, but a fascinating one. The little doctor believes it helps my memory, along with her health program."

"She puts you to sleep? Gives you dream stimulants? Puts one of those metal caps with wires on your head?"

"How disapproving you sound, Anna. Yes, we do some of those things. It is a team sport . . . SRD, Shared Recreational Dreaming. We pooled our images in a preliminary session. Now we meet in the dreamwood."

"Sam and the girl and you . . ."

"Even the guard, Mayhew."

"Is it safe? Are you sure it's safe?"

"What have I got to lose?" said Oleg, with a touch of his old world-weariness. He had been very cynical, she remembered; moody, passionate, full of sly humor.

"Wallace was very much against dream research," she said. "You know how he could be . . . against things."

But Kirrilow, after their brisk talk about dreaming, had leaned back and shut his eyes. When he opened them again he said: "Nanuschka!"

"No," she said softly. "*Anna* . . ."

"Come into our dreamwood. It is a kind of paradise."

"No," she said. "I am still too sad. This conversation reminds me of the Palm Lounge of the Hotel Esplanade."

"Tell me," he said. "I have completely forgotten. I have forgotten my poems. I have forgotten my childhood. I have forgotten my women."

"Perhaps you have telescoped some of your experiences," she said, teasing.

He lay back in the chair, relaxed and smiling, and went to sleep. Anna

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walked to the window and saw Laurel and Sam raking the leaves together for a bonfire. She went quietly into the hallway, then looked back into the room at Kirrilow. He sighed in his sleep and groaned.

Mothering trees, tree-mothers, rocking me in their branches . . . I wrote that in fifty-two. No, where? Nowhere. They are giving me plenty of rope, all I need is the right branch. I will elude you, comrades, after all, I will fly by your nets. I am the dada and the sun . . . Zürich my kind old mattress . . . Zürich has a lot to answer for. My images are being despoiled hourly by fools, by non-poets, dolts from east and west. Nanuschka, you seized my tower, you robbed me cruelly of my seed, you were a ball-biting clock puncher. Galina, you were an unspeakable disappointment. I was robbed of all my children. They were aborted, or kidnapped to the west in utero. What a swathe I might have cut as a young man in the holy wood, in hollywood, peopled the green breast of the new world with my ikons. Girls, you have let me down, you birch trees, you shaggy tree mothers. I will tread you, set my foot on your faces . . . as I do upon these mushrooms beside the path. Sweet needle carpet. Magic carpet carrying me deeper and deeper into the dreamwood. My wood, my world, my word. In the beginning was the word and the word was odd. One of Wallace's jokes. Old friend, you have gone off and left me in this dark wood with only your stale mates. Who is that long boy, that unwise child who is threatening to despoil my wood with a watchtower? I cannot permit it. Certainly I will take Anna, even if she is sullen, even if she laughed at me in the Hotel Esplanade. She was not there in our heyday, in the days of the commune. I must remain alert in my wood . . . from the watchtowers in the grounds of the clinic one could be picked off through the trees. See there, what did I tell you, my soul, there is the palm court I made here in the wood for Anna, and that pig Mayhew is truffling about in it. I have drawn him into the wood with the aid of the little tree-doctor and her wonder drugs. He may not escape. I hide among my trees and watch him. Ah, by sleeping, only by sleeping and dreaming, to wreak revenge upon the whole world! Annihilating all that's made . . . could I die thus? Is it like lying down in the snow? To cease upon the midnight with no pain. I cannot see what flowers are at my feet or what soft incense hangs about the boughs. Incense is the opium of the people. Tee-hee. I am falling into my anecdotage. I will wake, I suppose. I will wake at least once more . . .

Anna was going about examining the sleeping arrangements. Someone who lived out of a grey kit-bag was quartered in her workroom beside the kitchen; Mayhew of course, with a view of the drive and of the front gate.

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Upstairs, everyone slept alone. Kirrilow had the big double bedroom, Dr. Weiss the study. She went a little way up the ladder and stuck her head into the kids' roomy attic. Sam was using his old bed and his old patchwork quilt. Anna worked out that she had been placed in the guest room.

She went in and almost screamed. Chet Mayhew lay face down on the blue-chintz bed cover, one hand trailing; he lay where he had fallen, as if he had been sapped. He had set her bags down neatly beside the bed . . . then he seemed to have fallen asleep. An exposition of sleep had come upon him, like Bottom among the fairies. When she shook him the big man simply curled up and made himself more comfortable.

Anna went to the window and called for Dr. Weiss.

"What is it?" shouted Sam.

Anna shouted back, straight-faced: "Someone is sleeping in my bed!"

She stood watching Mayhew while Sam and Laurel came thundering up the stairs and burst in at the door. The noise did not reach the sleeper at all.

"God damn it, Anna, couldn't you keep him from falling asleep!" cried Sam.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oleg!"

"This is good old Chet cluttering up my room," she said. "Oleg is in his chair downstairs. What kind of a crazy house . . ?"

Laurel Weiss quietened Sam with a glance.

"Mayhew is over-sensitive to the inductors," Laurel said. "It's a rare side effect."

She rolled up Mayhew's sleeve and gave him a shot with a disposable needle. Anna felt sick. A gust of wind hit the spruce tree outside the window and rustled its branches violently. It was Wallace turning in his grave.

"Oleg Kirrilow has a powerful empathetic personality," continued Laurel. "When he sleeps he can draw Chet back into the image matrix."

Chet Mayhew woke up. He was wide awake, his eyes straining open, his muscles tense.

"Sorry!" he panted. "Sorry, Ms. Gordon . . . it is the darnedest thing. . . ."

"You were in the wood?" asked Laurel smoothly. "You were in the wood and you saw Kirrilow . . ?"

"No," he said. "I knew he was there, but I didn't set eyes on him. It was a part of the wood I hadn't been in before, more like a tropical rainforest. The palm trees were very tall, some had black trunks like tree ferns, and I was walking across a bridge to some kind of picnic area with white wrought-iron furniture. There was music playing . . . kind of like gypsy violins. There was still a touch of the old search-party

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then . . . I knew we were strung out through the wood looking for the lost child. I think this comes from me a little, I told you about the search parties I was in. Anyhow, I went on down towards the music, hoping to find the band leader, or someone to get a drink from. I looked off to the left, through the palm trees, and saw a girl I knew sitting at a table, tall girl with black hair, very smooth black hair . . . a girl I haven't thought of for years, name of Scott, Nan Scott. It was a composite, not the real Nan Scott but a dream version of her, wearing a dress of shiny blue cotton."

"Chintz," put in Anna softly.

"Uh-huh," said Laurel, "Chintz, like the bedspread. Go on, Chet . . ."

"I went towards the girl, feeling pleased, and then the needle took effect. I woke up."

"Okay," said Laurel. "Not a lot of Kirrilow in the dream that we can see at present. Perhaps you are blocking his experience, Chet, trying to control the images yourself. Let's break it up."

Laurel helped Mayhew up and urged him out of the room. As Sam went to follow, Anna detained him.

"I must talk to you," she said.

He wagged his head about in the old sulky way, as if to say "Here comes the bawling out!"

"Please, Sam . . ."

She led the way across the passage and round a corner into the study. It was the room she dreaded most. There were the books, there was the desk with its photographs in a set of cherrywood frames, the gift of a Japanese graduate student. They sat side by side on the big studio couch, which had been made up as a bed for Doctor Weiss, and stared at the relics of Wallace Gordon: historian, critic, political theorist, biographer, teacher, lover, family man, bellyacher, boss.

"I know what you're going to say," said Sam. "The Old Man hated this kind of therapy. It made him foam at the mouth, okay? But he is dead, Anna. This is *your* house. It was *always* your house, that is why it was always such a great place for me. It is my winter home, just as the house in La Jolla is my summer place. The Old Man wasn't the only influence in my childhood . . . I had *two* mothers, Mom and Anna, and they were both swell, both broad-minded, both caring. Please, Anna, don't let me down. Don't make me pass up this opportunity to help Oleg and to help Laurel with her research."

"You're a sophist," said Anna. "You argue unfairly. Sam, I am afraid of this damned dreamwood, this dream world of yours, and of your smooth-tongued little doctor who knows nothing about Oleg or about this family. More than anything, I am afraid of the 'inductors'—group hallucinogens, of course, and highly illegal."

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"Nope!" said Sam. "This is a properly controlled medical experiment performed by a doctor. And it *is* helping Oleg Kirrilow . . . when he first arrived he was *much* worse, truly, Anna. You can check with old Brodski in New York . . . we took him there for a back-up medical opinion."

It was a sensible thing to do, she had to admit.

"What did Abe Brodski have to say?"

"A lot of head shaking. He recommended rest and the company of friends. He played chess with Oleg. He said did we have another Master or Class I player to keep Oleg amused . . ."

Sam's voice shook. They looked at the desk: there were two photographs of Fay Gordon, Sam's mother, Wallace's first wife, who had died in an automobile accident five years past. A slim fair woman. The larger photograph showed her winning a women's regional championship. She was the only chess player in the family; Wallace had been very proud of her chess—she had never let him win. Anna had never liked nor understood Wallace's first wife, but the two women had done their best. *They* had never exchanged a cross word. Yet some of Fay's gambits were puzzling.

"She was a great player, Sam," said Anna. "Did she ever tell you about the Russian tour, when they first met Kirrilow?"

"She had all her games published," said Sam.

"No," said Anna patiently, "Did you hear about the very first trip they made after the war? London, Moscow, Zürich . . . they saw a lot of Kirrilow. He turned up wherever they went. He was with them in Zürich for three months, recovering from a bout of pneumonia. Did Fay ever speak of that time?"

"I always wanted to go along!" said Sam.

"Sam, you weren't even *born*!"

"I was sick of hearing about Europe," he said. "Hey—something I remember! They brought back all kinds of crazy wooden toys and a nutcracker. A nutcracker shaped like a soldier in a blue uniform with a pointy helmet and a grey beard made of rabbit fur. I used to think this Oleg they were always talking about must look like the nutcracker. I must tell him that. The nutcracker from the Nutcracker Suite!"

He was flinging about the small room in his old restless fashion.

"Must get back!" he said. "Chet and Laurel will be dishing up lunch."

"About Kirrilow," she said faintly, losing heart. "About Kirrilow . . . have they woken him up? Does he keep dropping off and returning to this dream place?"

"Of course not. That was probably just a side-effect from meeting you. Just like the business with Chet is a side-effect. Who would have thought that poor old Chet was so sensitive to the inductors? Normally he doesn't take part in the sessions. He stays on watch."

Well, that makes two of us, thought Anna.

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"Go on down," she said. "I'll freshen up."

"And you won't upset the experiment?"

"No," she said. "No. But don't expect too many good vibes from old Anna."

"Kirrilow loves you," he said suddenly, with a cheeky, foolish grin that showed he had understood nothing at all. "That old guy is still carrying a torch!"

He ducked out of the room cheerily, as if she might throw a cushion at him. Anna sat in silence and despair. What shall I do? she asked. *Wallace . . . Fay . . . what shall I* do? In her mind, Wallace gave his usual answer. In his last years he had been consumed by a rabid impatience, hardly able to speak a civil word to anyone, least of all to his wife. *"To hell with you, you're a fool, get away from me, not another word . . . !"* And Fay, looking up from some eternal chess game, did not understand the question.

Anna hurried out of the room, cursing the pair of them. She changed out of her creased denim jacket and trousers and went down to eat tough stew; Mayhew and the doctor had failed to get the hang of the old stove. Oleg was subdued at lunch but more lucid than ever. All might yet be well.

In the afternoon, she went for a walk in the woods with Mayhew and Oleg, both very gallant, helping her to step over the roots of trees. Mayhew had a professional bonhomie that she associated with male nurses or even bodyguards. He kept saying "There you go . . ." They walked along an easy track, and saw the remains of Sam's old tree house in a mighty cedar. Oleg made some remark in Russian and when she turned to him he was distressed, pale and gasping. He backed against a tree trunk and would not speak English any more. When she came closer he shouted at her, harsh words, invective. Mayhew, whose Russian was good, drew her aside.

"Take it easy," he said. "He's talking to someone else. Maybe to his wife."

Kirrilow was wide-eyed. She guessed he was telling someone to go, get away, leave him alone. He stood propped against the tree in Wallace's check shirt and abused his young wife, Galina, who had left him more than twenty years ago and settled down with a film-maker.

"I don't like what he's saying," muttered Chet Mayhew.

"What is it?"

"Oh, the Doc said there was no risk," he said, "but I always hate it. He talks of death. Of dying . . . you know, ending it all."

Anna lost her temper. She went up to Kirrilow and shouted, "Oleg, you bastard, I'm up to here with this shit! I took too goddamn much of it from Wallace! Snap out of it and let us help you!"

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Kirrilow blinked and said crossly, "No need to shout!"

"What was bothering you?" she demanded.

"Nothing. I don't remember," he said, sulking. "It was that . . . that platform in the tree. Reminded me of a guard's tower in the grounds of the asylum." —

She went closer to him and gripped his big, soft hands. She said firmly, "You are safe here. You're in Maine, U.S.A., in Wallace's house. No one is threatening you. You want to live . . . to start a new life!"

He looked at her keenly and replied in the same manner, angry but straightforward, "I'm not at all sure about that."

He walked between her and Mayhew, blundering along the track back towards the house. They followed him in silence. Anna was determined to press her advantage, if she had one. She sat Kirrilow down in the living room, poured him a vodka and asked, "Why did they give you such a bad time, Oleg?"

"They didn't," he said. "I wasn't important to them. As a young man I was one of the performers, you know? I was an artist, permitted to travel about in Europe. Helsinki, West Berlin, Zürich, even Paris. I never took advantage, never abused my privileges. How else could I have kept up a real friendship with Wallace and Fay and yourself? Perhaps I was cowardly in my choice of themes and books to translate. At any rate, I led a charmed life. I was poor, of course, but relatively honest. Then, just as my poems and the translations of English classical authors began to do a little better, my publisher got into trouble over another matter. We fell together. I had no influential friends. So the bad time began at last."

"Oleg, why did they let you go?"

"I put in many applications."

He downed a second drink.

"I am old and mad," he said. "They were afraid."

The light was fading; tree shadows had spread into the room. Anna felt that this was Kirrilow as she remembered him: sad, self-centered. She was filled with compassion.

"Please, Oleg," she said, "please take care. Please take heart. Surely you have much to live for . . ."

He took another drink and fixed her with his glittering eye. "Come into the dreamwood, Anna."

"No," she said, "no, I'm damned if I will. But I will be here when you wake. I was thinking of Christmas, here in this house in the woods. With Sam and Laurel, if she is his girl, and Frances, my own daughter, you've never met her, and her husband Dick, and her two sons, Wally and Gray. A real Christmas, with turkey and a tree . . . it has been so long . . ."

"Simple pleasures!" he said loftily. "And that great booby Sam was

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babbling away at lunch about the Nutcracker Suite. To think that I once longed with all my heart . . ."

"Leave Sam alone. He knows nothing."

"You're telling me!" said Oleg.

She could not help laughing, although she called him a brute. This was how they had talked in the Hotel Esplanade. If she turned her head the woman she would see reflected in the window's dark mirror would be a younger version of herself, with a smooth fall of dark hair. Laurel Weiss came in, wagged her finger at them, and took away the vodka bottle. Anna turned on a lamp and Kirrilow built up the fire. There was a coming and going of automobiles before the house: Sam came in with pizzas, french fries, thick shakes. It turned out that Mayhew had gone to spend the night in a motel.

"Just a precaution," murmured Laurel.

"Hey, Oleg," said Sam, "I must give you a copy of Mom's book, with all her games."

"He is a thoughtful boy, Anna," said Kirrilow, "to give me a book of his mother's games."

Anna could not meet his eyes, but the heavy irony did not register on Sam or on the doctor. They sat comfortably together in the firelight, and Laurel said, "We must do the preparation."

"Stay with us, Anna," said Oleg Kirrilow softly. "Doctor . . . tell Anna every step so that she is no longer afraid."

"I can't go along," she said.

"Hush . . ." said Oleg. "We will just show you."

"You might change your mind," said Sam. "All we do is meditate a little. We think of the wood, the dreamwood."

He reached out and took her hand on one side, as Oleg did on the other. Laurel, on a leather hassock, completed the circle. Anna thought of the woods near the house; she thought of the northern forests and birch groves of Russia, Kirrilow's homeland. Laurel came in like a voice-over in a documentary film: "We have all taken our first induction capsules . . . they keep working with time-regulated dosage. To return to the shared image pattern, we need only put on the sleep helmets upstairs, which help create a particular sleep rhythm. Anna, you can take part in the experiment even if you don't take the inductor capsule. I believe that our combined image strength can draw you into the dreamwood even in natural sleep. Certainly it would do so if you took the capsule . . . you wouldn't need the sleep helmet with a first dosage. So whatever you decide to do, think of the dreamwood, help us establish the pattern again and meet there together as we have done for three nights now . . ."

"Is it like a dream?" asked Anna. "Like a *real* dream, with changes of

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atmosphere, cnanges of shape . . . is it truly dreamlike, or more like an hallucination?"

"Better than a dream," said Sam. "The action is clearer, more controlled. You can speak to each other, communicate . . ."

"Make love," said Laurel. "Eat and drink. Take notes and recall them afterwards."

"In the forest of the dream
The poet makes and unmakes his bracken bed."

Kirrilow was quoting his favorite author in his own translation.

"Memories fall thick as leaves . . ."

Anna said, "So *that* is where you found the dreamwood!"

He smiled and pressed her hand. She wished she could remember the next lines of the poem. Was it called "Elegy"? Soon afterwards, Laurel was satisfied with the preparation. The three dreamers bade Anna goodnight and went upstairs, leaving her with only a large capsule of an exquisite violet blue. She rolled it around on the coffee table, hunting for yet another literary reference . . . there was a violet capsule and it hadn't worked.

Free association brought nothing except a feeling that the author was unpopular in this house, on Wallace's black list. She settled down to an uncomfortable evening; it was barely eight o'clock. She was weary, but she dared not sleep . . . if she did manage to drop off naturally, she would wake again at twelve or at two.

Anna threw out food containers, then washed the dishes remaining from lunch. It was too late to drink coffee, too early for a night-cap. She considered calling Abe Brodski in New York, or her good friend Nell in the shabby atelier in New Jersey where they did industrial photography. She considered shrieking with frustration and anxiety. She searched for a volume entitled *Soviet Nature Poets* from the Freedom Press, and realized it was probably in the study upstairs where Laurel was dreaming. She found, as one always did, a book she had wanted to re-read . . . the biography of a woman writer. So the hours passed; she made a cup of tea; and read on and on.

She finished her book between two and three, and crept warily to bed, as if the upper floors might be full of trees and forest creatures. She was unpleasantly tired, but her nerves still jangled. She placed the blue inductor capsule in a bowl on the dressing table of the guest room and took two of her own sleeping pills. She slept deeply and did not dream at all.

II

The sun came into the guest room and blazed at her from the mirror and the vase of maple leaves. Anna was cold; there was not much warmth

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in the autumn sun. She lay wide-awake after her dreamless sleep and heard the absolute forbidding silence of the house. Her watch was lying somewhere about, maybe in the bathroom, but it must be getting on for ten o'clock. The dreamers slept late. She pulled up a down quilt and still shivered.

This was an old nightmare of hers: to be awake in the morning while the whole world slept in. Everyone had done this to her, first her parents, then Wallace. Wallace and Sam and even Fran, they were all late sleepers. She got up now with the silence of the upper floor weighing upon her spirit, and dressed. She scuffled into her track suit so as to be the one in the house who was dressed, ready to answer the phone or deal with callers.

In the kitchen, she continued a long double take over the time of day. Her watch lay on the bench; it had stopped shortly after midnight, ten after twelve. She put on the coffee and went into the living room. When she drew the curtains the sunlight streamed in; she went to sweep out the grate and saw the digital clock on the mantelpiece. Twelve after twelve. Hey . . . she had slept for eight, nine hours! She heard the coffee plunking, the birds singing, the wind in the trees. Her heart thumped painfully. The dreamers had slept for *fifteen hours*.

She sat anxiously at the kitchen table, drinking her coffee. This was how it would be, she cursed, the whole deal was programmed. She was alone with them, not knowing whether to wake them. Surely it was unhealthy, wrong for them to sleep so long. She *must* look . . . must look and somehow not recall how she had run up those stairs once before, and looked, and found Wallace dead in his sleep in the room where Kirrilow now slept.

She went to Sam first of all. He looked terrible, comically awful, sprawled all over his too-small bed like Frankenstein's monster, in a plastic headband and a pair of thermo trousers. His face was pale, he breathed noisily through his mouth. Anna gritted her teeth, ready to cope with his displeasure; she slipped off the plastic headband and tried to wake him. She worked on him for a quarter of an hour, beginning with timid pats and whispers, quickly followed by shaking, *violent* shaking, shouts and cries. Sam moved only once, jack-knifing into a foetal position; his face did not move. He groaned faintly when she pulled his hair and tweaked his nose, but his eyes remained tightly shut and she did not try to pry them open. What came after sleep? Was he stuporous? In a coma? Were these states blurred now because of the inductor drug and the sleep headband? She covered him with the patchwork quilt, climbed down from the attic and stormed into the study.

Laurel Weiss slept neatly, and reacted a little more than Sam had done. Anna boldly removed the headband and turned back the bed

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clothes. Maybe if she was colder, the girl would wake. She understood the use of the thermo trousers . . . necessary equipment for wanderers in the dreamwood: they had a waste system. Was this a sign that the dreamers expected to sleep very deeply and for a long time?

She went to the bookcase and took down *Soviet Nature Poets*, then drifted around to the main bedroom. She stood in the doorway, stilling the beating of her heart, and watched Oleg Kirrilow. He lay propped up on his pillows, smiling faintly, with his arms stretched out on top of the bedclothes. She turned to the poem he had quoted and found that it was called "Threnody":

In the forest of the dream
The poet makes and unmakes his bracken bed.
Memories fall thick as leaves
But he brushes them aside . . . treads down
all his former loves,
The old cruel systems, the lost children,
(Only a child reared is a child worth loving)
So he returns at last to his wood, his world,
The shade of his mothering trees,
Where he can roam untrammeled, singing
a last song,
Passing through nature to a wished oblivion . . .

There was more of it, but Anna did not turn the page. As she stood staring at the sleeping poet, angrily wishing him to wake, the electric buzzer from the front gate rang downstairs and continued ringing in staccato bursts. She went flying down to answer it.

". . . Highway Patrol, Ma'am." She had not caught the officer's name. "Is that Ms. Gordon?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm just on my way to the gate to fetch the mail. I'll speak to you there, okay?"

She jogged down the drive. Hold the fort. Keep away the press and the police. Two academics and a refugee poet comatose in her house.

Sergeant Schmidt smiled warily; he had his cap off, revealing thick fair hair. They got younger every year.

"Trouble at your turn-off, Ma'am," he said. "Driver of a Ford Fiesta, light gray. Ran into a tree."

He rattled off the license number; Anna was gripping the top of the metal gate.

"Recognize the car, Ms. Gordon?" The Sergeant nodded at his colleague, sitting at the wheel of the patrol car. "We had an idea he was coming to the Professor's house. Charles Edward Mayhew . . . address on the campus of John Latimer University College."

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"We know him," said Anna. "He was coming to visit us. He's an associate of my son, Sam Gordon. Is he . . ?"

"Doesn't look good," said the sergeant. "I guess he has a skull fracture. Does your son know his folks?"

"I don't think so," she said. "Where is he now?"

"On the way to the hospital in Bingham," said the sergeant.

"This is a terrible thing. . . ."

The young man looked at her with professional sympathy and shook his head.

"I'll tell Sam," she said. She almost added "Is there anything we can do?" but then drew back. If the sergeant asked to talk to Sam, she would say he was out walking in the woods.

"You okay, Ms. Gordon?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, thank you. I'll tell Sam what happened. We'll call the hospital."

"Don't forget your mail, Ms. Gordon."

"Sergeant . . . how did it happen? Was there a collision?"

"No," he said. "Looked as though he just collapsed at the wheel."

Anna jogged back up the drive through the uncut grass, clutching a wine brochure and a catalogue of rare books; Wallace had always received high class junk mail. Wake! she shouted in her mind as she came up to the house. Inside she found her voice and shouted and roared at the sleepers.

"Wake up! Wake up! Mayhew is hurt! You have nearly killed him with your dreaming!"

The silence flowed back when she stopped yelling; the house creaked a little, was scraped by tree branches; the pipes sighed. She was filled with a sick, paralyzing anxiety for Sam. She had been the only one left to look after him, and she had failed, had delivered him into the power of mad Kirrilow and the little doctor. She must wake the doctor first . . .

Laurel went on tip toe over the soft grass of the clearing and began to dance, raising her hands above her head. The old man was watching her from the larch trees, Sam was still asleep in the tree house. As she danced, naked, she was able to recapitulate. There was a distinct sense of time-lapse here, she noted. Kirrilow had led her on a merry chase at first, hiding, running, raising up thickets and ancient tracts of forest where the leaf mold was knee-deep and the mossed trunks of fallen trees, soaked by the melting snows, formed a morass. All his doing. She tried to add nothing, but it was nearly impossible. For instance, she must soften the grass for her dancing floor. Of course, she had managed an interview with the old man in the course of the session. When he'd come back, black-browed, clutching a sporting gun, over-excited about the tree

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house, which he took for a watchtower; the same excitement Chet had reported from the afternoon walk. She had calmed him in the usual way, with her smile, her wise/girlish look, the touch of her hands. She moved her hands now, beckoning and fluttering. The morning wind made her shiver. Kirrilow had been in a strange mood. He had enthroned himself on a tree stump and begun drinking vodka from a silver flask. Spoke jeeringly of women, saying they were all whores. When Sam had come to join them the old man was abusive, calling him a son-of-a-bitch. Then the old man had smiled and seemed to relent—called them his poor lost children, his babes in the wood, spoke of them all being covered with leaves while he sang a last song. Time-lapse. There was the place! Laurel ran across to where she had left her clothes; she slipped into her old blue joggers, which did not seem to have too much warmth in them.

There was a loud shout from the larch trees beside the swift-flowing brook. She ran across and saw Chet Mayhew lying upon the farther bank. He was hurt, blood ran down his face, he groaned and mouthed horribly.

"Whose image is this?" cried Laurel. "Who put *you* here? . . . you're not here, Chet!"

"Laurie, wake up!" panted Chet. "The old devil has smashed me!"

Kirrilow, in his hunting gear—a kind of Norfolk jacket and cap—came out of the trees beside the injured man. He carried a blood-stained tomahawk. My God, would this make a paper for the journal! Dream killing! Blood! Complete submergence in the dream matrix!

"Why did you do that?" she called. "Oleg? You made an image of Chet Mayhew and killed him. He isn't in the wood. He's miles away."

"Alas, yes," said Oleg Kirrilow. "Too far away now. I am no friend of secret policemen."

He flung aside the hatchet and stood near the body of Mayhew, which wavered and faded. It turned into a heap of leaves. Kirrilow sat down, smiling, and lit a pipe.

"I have immortal longings in me," he said. "Sleep some more, child."

She sat down cross-legged on the grass and grew a small birch tree, a berioska, to lean against. She was sleepy; time spun out.

"Anna didn't show after all," she said dreamily. "Are you sad, Oleg, because your Nanushka stood you up?"

"Stupid child," said Kirrilow. "Anna is the *new* wife. She is *not* the Nanushka whose name I called."

"That's interesting," said Laurel, sitting up eagerly. "I must make a note . . ."

As she stood up, a whole section of the bank gave way and she plunged into the icy waters of the brook.

Anna stood back grimly, holding the bucket of ice-water. The girl sat

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up, gasping and shrieking. Her eyes, wide open, focussed on Anna at last.

"Are you c-crazy . . . ?"

"Wake up!" said Anna. "Wake up quickly, Doctor. Chet Mayhew is badly hurt. He crashed his car."

She handed Laurel Weiss a towel. The girl reacted as quickly as she could have wished.

"What time is it?" she demanded.

"One o'clock, thirteen hours?" said Anna. "Sam is still sleeping. Kirrilow is a madman."

Laurel Weiss sprang from the soaked couch and went into the bathroom. She came out in seconds, wearing an old bathrobe, checked Kirrilow first, then climbed the ladder and checked Sam. Anna stood in the passageway and shouted information. Laurel came down from the attic and flung past her, going down the stairs. Anna went after her, shouting angrily: "Wake him up! Wake Sam! Give him a shot!"

"Sam is fine!" said the girl. "Ms. Gordon, Anna, you're freaking out . . . do you know that? Calm down. Let me have some coffee."

"Do you want me to call the John Latimer Clinic?" said Anna. "Do you want me to call the police, and an ambulance?"

"The phone is out," said Laurel. "It's disconnected."

She poured two fresh beakers of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table in a patch of sunlight. Anna saw that she was shivering a little with shock and cold. She sat down herself.

"You think *he* did that?" Laurel whispered. "You think Oleg kept us in the dreamwood until Chet drove back . . . then drew him in, made him fall asleep at the wheel . . ?"

"Yes!" said Anna. "He is suicidal. And dangerous. He is full of hatred. He does not mean to wake."

"He wouldn't harm Sam. He couldn't. The son of his old friends . . ."

"His own son," said Anna. "His lost child. He still half believes it. But he's not satisfied with Sam. Neither was Wallace."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was never Kirrilow's lover," said Anna. "It was Fay Gordon, Sam's mother, the chess player. The three of them, Fay, Wallace, and Oleg, were a *menage à trois*, in Zürich, wherever they met. Oleg was convinced that *he* was the father of Fay's child. I never knew what Fay herself thought. They all remained friends . . . argued, suffered, agonized about the child."

"Blood tests?"

"Inconclusive," said Anna. "In Zagreb, years later, Kirrilow suggested that Fay and Wallace had falsified the tests."

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"Crazy," said Laurel. "And they said nothing to Sam! *You* knew . . . *you* said nothing."

"Sam was a difficult enough child without laying *this* on him," said Anna. "Wallace was very demanding. He was also a hard act to follow. Sam would have run away for good if there had been the slightest suggestion that Wallace was not his father."

"You're to blame as much as anyone," said Laurel. "This is a big study in parental incompetence."

"Wake Sam," said Anna, "or this will be a big study in malpraxis. Drug misuse. A gift for those East-Bloc alienists who sent Kirrilow away so that he could commit suicide in the west."

"I don't accept this notion that Oleg is suicidal!"

"Oleg spoke of 'ending it all' . . . he spoke of it in Russian, and Chet Mayhew warned you of these death threats!"

"He can't offer violence to anyone in the dreamwood . . ."

"Consciously or unconsciously, he managed to harm *Mayhew*," said Anna. "How did Kirrilow behave? What did he say?"

Laurel sipped her coffee. "He called us both his children," she said. "Yes . . . I hate to do this piecemeal. It makes me botch the total recall of the notes. He called Sam and me his poor lost children . . . he said we should all be covered with leaves while he sang a last song . . ."

"I beg you . . . get Sam away from that crazy old man!"

"Yes," said Laurel Weiss slowly. "Okay. But take it easy. You must help me. I'm going to have to obtain certain equipment. I'll also call the hospital . . . see how Chet is doing."

"Equipment?" said Anna in a choked voice.

"I want them both on a drip. I don't want to try a jolt on Sam, certainly not on Kirrilow."

"For God's sake . . ."

"Will you listen, Anna? I want you to go into the dreamwood to help me. You're the only one who can do it."

Anna gave a gusty sigh. She heard the sounds of the house and of the trees outside the house stretching away to the mountains and to the sea.

"I slept a long time last night," she said. "I may have trouble dropping off. . . ."

Anna wakes after a short confused dream of Wallace and the children. She is fully dressed, even to her boots; she flings aside the quilt and goes to the window. Yes, she must go into the wood. And with that thought she is *in* the wood, standing by the old cedar. She takes in the exquisite new reality of the dreamwood, feels the bark of the cedar, speaks aloud and hears herself speak. It is so beautiful: the old cedar tree stands on a small hill in the midst of a springtime birch forest. The trunks of the

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trees are black in shadow, silvery when the light strikes them. Through the feathery green of the underbrush she glimpses the still waters of a lake.

"Anna?"

She starts at the sound of the voice, then watches calmly as Sam comes down the ladder from the tree house.

"Hey, what a great session," he says. "I can tell you're not just an image. You really did it!"

His voice is strange, a voice half in her mind.

"Where is Oleg?" she asks awkwardly.

"He was here a while back."

He touches her arm and leads the way down the hill. She follows eagerly, looking at the path, a rough ordinary track through the bracken.

"Wait, Sam! Do we see the same wood? Do we see this same path?"

"Sure," he says. "We alter the wood unconsciously all the time, and we accept the changes that others make."

Before them lies a clearing among the birch trees, and what she took to be a lake is a little rushing stream with fir trees and blue spruce and other gaunt, dark conifers growing thick and wild upon the further bank. The wood itself and the dream state intoxicate her; she looks up to the sky and twirls around like a child, watching the tops of the trees. She looks down giddily and watches bluebells, crocuses, and daffodils growing in the soft grass at the base of the birch trees. Kirrilow is there. She can sense him. She looks about for him, but sees only a movement among the branches across the stream.

"Sam . . ."

She must run, leaping over a few fallen branches, to catch up to him, far across the clearing.

"Sam . . . listen to me!"

"What?"

"Laurel wants you to end the session. To wake as soon as you can."

"Aw, come on now . . ."

He is unbelieving, balky, childish. She feels a rush of irritation; she shakes his arm. This was how it used to be, a continual pushing and pulling, daylong, yearlong. The raising of Sam: stubborn, moody, ornery from sun up, when he would not wake, to sundown, when he began the long fight against going to bed.

"Okay," says Anna. "You're all grown up, Sam. But that is the message."

"Laurie wouldn't leave the group!" he says angrily.

"She is awake. I swear it. *Please* end the session."

Sam stretches his arms high above his head, and leaps up to touch a

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certain branch. It is an expression of his freedom and well-being. He shouts out loud, "Hey, Oleg! Oleg Kirrilow! Look who's here!"

Anna gestures to him—even cries out "No! No!"—but he grins and dances away like a schoolboy, crying out again.

"Here's Anna Hay, Anna Hay . . . come to spoil our fun . . ."

A bear-like shape parts the branches of two ragged trees; Kirrilow stands upon the far bank of the river, wearing a long officer's greatcoat slung over his hunting dress. Anna perceives that he is young, younger than she has ever seen him. He has all his hair again, thick and golden-brown, carelessly cropped at the level of his strong jaw. His voice is powerful; he speaks in Russian, very slow and clear, for her to understand.

"Send away the whore's son!"

"Be damned to you!" says Anna. "Speak English. Send him away yourself!"

Kirrilow spreads his arms and lifts his noble head. He utters a long sad cry, full of passion, full of pain.

"I was a poet!" he says, before the echoes have died away. *"I strove all my life . . ."*

"You were and *are* a mean, egotistical pain in the ass!" replies Anna. "You're also a coward. You tried to murder Chet Mayhew!"

Sam is deeply affronted; he dances about, seizes Anna by the arm.

"Are you out of your mind? You can't talk to Oleg that way!" He calls to Kirrilow, "Don't take any notice of her . . . she's crazy. It's only old Anna Hay . . ."

"My dear boy," says Kirrilow nastily.

He seats himself upon a convenient stump and takes from the pocket of his greatcoat a pipe that seems to be permanently alight. When he puffs, polluting the dreamwood, Anna can smell nothing.

"Anna, the *new* wife . . ." he muses. "Have we come so far, my dear, that you abuse me? Why have you come so late to the forest of dreams? I think it is a put-up job from the little doctor. You're trying to rile me, to provoke me so that I will wake. I am proof against your polemic, Anna Hay."

"Is that what you're doing, trying to make him mad?" asks Sam. "*Is* Laurel awake? Did she leave us?"

"Yes!" cries Anna. "Sam . . . wake up!"

Kirrilow roars with laughter.

"What a fool! What a booby! And *that* should be my own son? *That* should be the son of Wallace Gordon? I think Nanushka, our blonde fairy-fay, betrayed *both* her lovers, and chose a moron to sire her child."

"Like I said," Anna hears her voice tremble. "A cruel and cowardly old man."

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She turns towards Sam and watches him very closely. His dreamwood face is a composite of his real face, like the eerie composite photograph of Lombroso's "criminal type." In his wavering features at that moment Anna can discern both his putative fathers, as well as the unworldly look of his mother as a young woman. He staggers, puts out a long arm to steady himself against a tree, and stands firm. He looks at last exactly like Sam, thirty-five years old; he takes in the information so long withheld and does not protest or fidget. She sees that he has grown up after all. It is so great a relief that she begins to weep. She feels hot tears welling out of her eyes and coursing down her cheeks.

"Don't cry," says Sam. "After all this time, it's not important what they did."

She shakes her head, trying to smile at him.

"What's with Mayhew?" he asks.

"He collapsed over the wheel of his car down at the end of our road. He's in the hospital."

"Come on, now!" says Sam. "That's his heart, or maybe the inductors . . . not Oleg. What time of day is it?"

"I entered the wood at fourteen hours."

"I'll wake. Anna, come with me. Leave him here."

"Stay!" roars Kirrilow. "This is my country. Stay with me! *You cannot leave the dreamwood . . .*"

Sam runs off into the wood, putting his hands over his ears. Anna feels faint with the effort of imparting so much information. Straight talk is not the language of the dreamwood. She sinks down on the soft grass and leans against a convenient birch tree.

"I read your poem," she says. " 'Threnody.' "

"A free rendering," says Kirrilow. "It is always better in Russian."

The euphoria of the place is taking hold of her again; she floats and soars. Kirrilow is intoning his verses softly in his own language. At last she says, "Oleg, you've stayed too long in the dreamwood. You should wake."

"I will never leave my little kingdom," he says. "I am healed! I am young again! I have total recall . . . well, very nearly. I can summon up remembrance of things past."

As he speaks, a young woman in grey trousers and a short fur coat comes slowly out of the trees on his side of the stream. It is Fay Gordon. Anna watches with a soft detachment which is another property of the dreamwood state. She perceives that Fay has no independent life, not even the waywardness of a ghost. Oleg has summoned up this image, but he cannot talk to his old love, or take her hand.

"Oh, come on now!" calls Anna, echoing Sam. "You can remember better than *that*. Wake up! Start living again!"

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Oleg is enraged. He turns away from the image of young Fay and it fades at once. He throws up his arms as he comes to the bank of the stream and a bridge of logs is ready for him to cross. He rushes down upon Anna, but she is too fast for him. She is not quite brave enough to sit still and see if he can touch her.

"Run then, you foolish woman!" he cries. "Go far and wide! *You will never come out of the forest of the dream!*"

Anna turns to face him, marveling still at the trees, the grass, the foliage taking on the autumn colors of the wood around the house.

"Oleg," she says, pleading. "Why should we quarrel? I came to help you. I'm your friend."

"Never!" he says, shaking his handsome head. "You are a meddler, a person of no understanding. Wallace had your measure, oh yes! How he bewailed your incompetence, your triviality, your second class mind! See . . . *that* hurts you, Anna Plurabella. That was what Wallace said in Zagreb, while we enjoyed in turn the little Intourist girl, the fat one. How he laughed at your prudishness in the Palm Court, your pathetic loyalty!"

Anna feels sick, punch-drunk. She tries to crack back at him, but has no words left, either soothing or angry. She blunders off into the wood to hide her shame and embarrassment. Oleg Anton Kirrilow. Always their friend. One name never black-listed in their house. I had to meddle, she tells herself, leaning against a sturdy oak, I had to give it a try. She feels sure that Sam is awake now, he is safe. She leans against the oak, eyes closed, thinking "I will wake soon."

The first person that she sees when she opens her eyes is Sam. Laurel Weiss stands at the foot of her bed, neat and unruffled.

"Very good!" she says briskly.

"Sam," says Anna, "are you okay?"

"Fine . . . just fine . . ."

His voice seems to come from a long way off. Anna lets sweet relief wash over her for a few seconds, than croaks guiltily, "How is Oleg? How is poor Mayhew?"

"Responding to treatment," says Laurel Weiss.

Anna turns her head on the pillow, but she cannot see Sam any more. She sees the chest of drawers with its vase of red maple leaves. More than that, a whole maple tree, right there in her room. She begins to be afraid. She stares at the Doctor. Laurel Weiss lifts her arms above her head, smiling. Her limbs and trunk are defined first; as the change sweeps over her the girl's face becomes lost in a shower of bright green leaves. She turns into a birch tree.

Anna, sick with disappointment, is back in the wood again.

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She is completely lost now, with nothing to guide her. She wanders desolately, uphill and down dale. She feels Kirrilow's presence like a dark cloud, piling up above the wood. She hears a murmur of voices. Beside the path in a patch of sunlight a boy and girl are playing. Sam is showing little Fran how to build a wigwam. He has three broomsticks tied at the top and an old striped blanket that they call "the Indian blanket." She watches with sad delight. The wood is full of life and movement; she sees a pair of chickadees on a branch overhead. She passes a patch of brambles and eats ripe blackberries. She should pick some and take them back to make a pie. It is not so far to the house now, she can almost see it through the trees. Going home.

A man in a checkered shirt, blue and grey, comes out of the trees and walks ahead of her down the path. He turns and waits for her: it is not Kirrilow, it is Wallace. It is Wallace as he lived, a compromise between the thin, stiffly-erect old man he became and the jauntier, smiling scholar she married.

"Don't dawdle!" he says. "We must get you home!"

"Will walking do it?" asks Anna wearily.

"Yes. Keep going," Wallace orders.

"Oleg is here somewhere . . ."

"I know. I know everything that you know," Wallace says. "If you think back . . . which I wouldn't really enjoin you to do . . . you'll see that Kirrilow's outburst, which upset you so much, was an ingenious—a poetical—arrangement of half-truths. And the bit about the poor Russian girl was complete nonsense."

"You're just saying that," she grumbles. "You're just a figment of my imagination."

"You're right for once!"

He smiles and lifts an eyebrow in a way that she once found charming.

"Remember this," he says, "you stuck it out the longest."

"Do you mean that I knew you best?"

"Possibly," says Wallace.

He runs up a steep bank and comes to the cedar tree.

"Wives always think that they know a fellow best," Wallace continues. "What was it that the poor Welshman's wife said in a preface . . . 'An intensive handful of meetings, at divided intervals, do not do justice to the circumference of the subject.' I haven't got it quite right but it sums up the relationship I had with Oleg Kirrilow."

"You weren't a poet," she says irrelevantly.

"Thank your lucky stars!" says Wallace.

He reaches up with a youthful spring, catches a branch of the cedar tree and swings on it for a second. Anna recognises a kind of physical restlessness, a young man's trait that Wallace had almost grown out of

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by the time she met him . . . a trait that she swears Kirrilow has never possessed. Yet Sam shows it very strongly.

"Hurry!" says Wallace. "We have no more to say to each other. This vile drug-induced forest-of-the-dream is no place for a reconciliation."

He strides on down the path towards the house. A wind follows him, tossing the branches of the trees and tearing down leaves in handfuls. Anna watches him go through a changing season, fall into winter; clouds rush across the sky in time-lapse vortices. She is unutterably tired of being in the dreamwood. She turns to the north and sees the Fimbul winter hastening down upon her from the Canadian wild. The snow is dry and gritty, drifting upon the steps of the treehouse. Oleg comes wearily out of the low door; he is no longer young.

"Let's go back to the house," says Anna.

"You are a brilliant image-maker," he sighs. "Wallace . . . very life-like. Let me take my walk, Anna. You wake if you can."

He goes off through the thick snow, leaving a deep track into the pines. He is not dressed for winter, she reflects; perhaps he will lie down in the snow and fall asleep. She considers following him, saving him some way, sending a bear after him. She decides not to meddle. She is too tired. She drags herself up the steps of the treehouse; inside it is lined with fur and feathers, a cosy nest. She curls up and sleeps, and after an unknown passage of time, dreamwood time or other time, she half wakes to a wisp of down which brushes her cheek, then her chin.

She thrust it away, trying to sleep, to burrow into her nest, but the stroking of her face went on more firmly. She ungummed her eyelids. Sam was wiping her face with a wet washcloth.

"Anna?" he asked fearfully. "Anna, are you awake?"

She groaned aloud.

"I hope so," she said. "*Am* I awake, Sam?"

It was dark outside. Sam was pale and subdued. She jumped when a tree struck the window, but it kept its distance. She was awake. She flexed her limbs, remembering the feel of her dreamwood body, how it imitated life.

"What's the time?" she demanded. "How long have I slept?" And then, remembering, "How is Chet Mayhew?"

"He was lucky. He has a bad concussion, but he'll pull through."

"How is Oleg? Is he awake?"

"He'll be fine," said Sam. "He's just coming round. Laurel is with him and a male nurse from the Latimer Clinic. You want to look in on him?"

"No," said Anna.

"You want to get up? There's coffee and toast . . ."

"What time did you say it was?"

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"Around eleven. Twenty-three hours."

They went down and sat by the fire and held no post mortem on the dreamwood session. Presently, Laurel Weiss came down to join them. Anna saw how very neat she was, trim and clean and controlled. She came to Anna, smiling, and tried to shake her hand.

"We're getting some amazing stuff from the session," she said. "You are a marvelous subject, Anna. Oleg is full of admiration."

"Did you have trouble waking him?" asked Anna.

"A little. He has explained it . . . his reluctance to leave the dreamwood."

"Dr. Weiss," said Anna, "how is Kirrilow's general health? Are you quite sure of the strength of his heart?"

"Yes," said the little doctor. "He has to take things easy, but he is quite sound."

"Great," said Anna. "Then you can move him to the clinic tomorrow morning early. You can use the new station wagon if you prefer it."

They stared at her, appalled. Sam began to wave his arms; he mouthed, but no sound came.

"Your old friend!" said Laurel Weiss. "In his present state . . ."

"That's impossible!" shouted Sam. "Anna, how can you be so goddamned cruel to the poor old guy. . . ."

"Will you tell him, Ms. Gordon?" said Laurel. "Will you please speak with Kirrilow?"

"No," said Anna. "No, not any more. Nor with you, Dr. Weiss. Sam is the only person welcome in this house. I'll just make myself comfortable in this room until you have all gone."

She settled by the fire and found herself books, even a piece of knitting. It had started out as a sweater for Wallace, now she decided it would do for herself. She felt as if she would never need to sleep again. She walked out on to the verandah and looked at the stars and the sleeping woods, stretching far into the north, home of the winter. Christmas alone, why not? Or with Nell, or even in Mexico.

At seven o'clock, when it was getting light, she heard them escort Kirrilow down the stairs. Sam came into the living room and said, "Anna, this is some crazy *reaction* of yours. Oleg has nowhere else to go. He might . . . hell, he might even be . . ."

"He isn't your father," she said. "I decided that he isn't. And I bet you recall Fay telling you one thing . . . that Wallace *was* your father. Because it was true."

"Yes," he said. "Maybe she did. But all the same . . . Oleg . . ."

She turned her head away. She sat in the armchair that Kirrilow had used the day before and listened to them trying to start their cold engines. My God, she thought, what a mean woman you are. What a terrible thing

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to do to that poor old man. She smiled. She could not help smiling. A procession of automobiles roared away down the drive; the silence was broken only by the creaking of the house, the cry of a bird, the wind in the trees. I will write it all down, she thought. She even had a special book to write it in. Her grandson Wally, Fran's eldest boy, had given her a fat travel diary with the words *My Trip* embossed in gold.

Anna finished another row of knitting and took a sip of cold coffee. Her fault. Her foolishness. Pandering to Sam and his girl, to Oleg and his fantasies, to Wallace and the narrowing vision of an old, sick man. She had played along with all of them for too long. Had the dreamwood taught her that? Was there any value in the dreamwood experience, in Shared Recreational Dreaming? She must do a little reading on altered states. The words sent a shiver down her spine; she shut her eyes and saw the birch trees, heard the rushing stream. *I am in an altered state of consciousness*, she thought.

At last. At last. ●

NEXT ISSUE

We have a particularly exciting cover story for our Mid-December issue, **Isaac Asimov**'s first new Robot story since the award-winning "The Bicentennial Man" almost ten years ago. Its title is "Robot Dreams," and you may well find it to be the most poignant and thought-provoking of all the Good Doctor's Robot yarns; at any rate, you won't want to miss it. Our Mid-December issue also features the first instalment of a three-part serialization of **Michael Swanwick**'s big new novel *Vacuum Flowers*, a pyrotechnic and fast-moving tale, jam-packed with inventive detail, that sweeps us at a headlong pace across the solar system from the swarming space-habitats of the asteroid belt to the mysterious and haunted regions of Old Earth itself...

Also in Mid-December: **Harlan Ellison** makes his fiction debut in *IAsfm* with "Laugh Track," a wry and funny look at a woman who got into television in a bit too literal a way; **Lucius Shepard** returns with a strange and evocative story of longing and loss, "Dancing It All Away at Nadoka"; **Pat Murphy** unfolds a fascinating study of the human heart that takes place "In the Abode of the Snows," in the mountains of far Nepal; and new writer **Gregory Feeley,** in his *IAsfm* debut, spins a suspenseful tale of the unexpected dangers of planetary exploration, in "Neptune's Reach." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for the Mid-December issue on your newsstand on November 18th.

Coming up in 1987: new stories by **Lucius Shepard, Orson Scott Card, Gene Wolfe, Bruce Sterling, Robert Silverberg, Harry Turtledove, Isaac Asimov, Sharon Farber, Rudy Rucker, Kim Stanley Robinson, Gwyneth Jones, Tim Sullivan, Walter Jon Williams,** and many others. Subscribe now!

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JESSE REVENGED

by Don Webb

art: John Lakey

Don Webb describes himself as a small-press veteran whose work has appeared in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Norway. He has sold stories professionally to *Amazing*, *Interzone*, and *Fantasy Tales*, and he is currently revising a novel-length experimental work. "Jesse Revenged" marks his first appearance in *IAsfm*.

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The community of Oneida has become Amarillo, Tascosa is beginning to fade into the dust, and, a few weeks ago, Admiral Sampon blockaded the navy of Admiral Cervera in Santiago Bay. It is the summer of 1898. Robert Ford, the man who shot Jesse James in the back, has left the Ozarks and moved to Amarillo. He lives in the third floor of the yellow-painted wooden Amarillo Hotel. He's changed his name to Aubrey Sorrentino and affected an Italian accent.

He sits on the wide porch of the Amarillo and slowly fans himself. Lesser men would be blinded by the gleam from his refulgent ebon leather boots. But Aubrey sits with his boots up, face lit by the black light, and very slowly sips a Texas Tumbleweed.

Aubrey doesn't know that his doom is already coming by train from California.

He's plotting how to extend his hotel bill. Maybe he'll borrow money from a wealthy rancher using his phony Count title and his phony Old World charm. The reward money from shooting Jesse seventeen years ago has long since been converted to wine, women, and song. He'll have another cigar by and by.

Heavy rain last night, and the ridiculous wooden cobbles the city bought in the spring have begun to swell. Every now and then one pops out of the grid, shooting eight or ten feet into the air. The horses hitched in front of the hotel are getting a mite skittish. Aubrey wishes it were cooler.

In California, having completed his lecture on philosophical conceptions and practical results, William James boards an eastbound train. His brother Henry had arrived a week before, ostensibly to autograph copies of the just-released *In the Cage* at a Navajo bookstore in nearby Arizona. They have a private car.

William doesn't speak to Henry until they pass through Tombstone. He's just corrected proofs of *Human Immortality*. He's still peeved at Henry for siding with Frank and against him on the idea of the specious present. In Tombstone he recites the James brothers' creed to break the silence, "Never rob from a friend, a Southerner, a preacher, or a widow. Amen."

"Amen," says Henry.

Henry opens up a small hand-tooled leather valise. Inside are two pairs of pearl-handled revolvers. One pair had been Jesse's, the other is Frank's, who is too old for this. Henry hands Jesse's guns to William.

William says, "I see you're already interested in the dense symbolism and complicated characterization that will come to dominate your later work."

Henry nods grimly.

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As the warm stars of the Panhandle night begin to shine through the lavender and orange Texas sunset, Aubrey makes his way to his room. He opens his last bottle of Kentucky bourbon and dips his pen in the inkwell the Chinese boy has brought. The two civilizing claims that the six-year-old city of Amarillo has are a five-story hotel and two Chinese gofers, Joe Fong Yang and Joe Fong Yin. Aubrey begins the thirty-seventh chapter of his autobiography, *Robert Ford My Story*. Aubrey writes, "To Carthage I come, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang about my ears. Since I had developed elephantiasis in my testicles six months ago in New Orleans I was tone-deaf. So I went to Amarillo." He is referring to Carthage, Texas but the words—at least the first string of them—are St. Augustine's. The man who shot Jesse James in the back is not above plagiarism. Aubrey takes a long swig of bourbon and decides to stretch his legs. He locks his bio carefully away in a Confederate Army strongbox.

When Aubrey reaches the door of the Amarillo, no more sunset remains. He walks toward the depot, a thousand schemes hatching in his brain. A swarthy gypsy lights a kerosene lamp in front of a buffalo hide tent.

Madam Rosa

Reader and Advisor

Palm Head and Cards Read

The tent's new. The hides smell and look a little stiff. Aubrey walks up to the swarthy man. "How much?"

"Palm read ten cents. Head read ten cents. Cards read fifteen cents. Triple reading thirty cents."

Aubrey hands the man a quarter and a nickel. The gypsy sticks his head through the folds and says, "Triple reading." Aubrey enters. The man walks up the street toward the saloon.

Rosa, an ancient and enigmatic gypsy, quietly and efficiently does the three readings. Across the candles, she stares sad and sullen at the elderly stranger. Finally she says, "You've got troubles."

"Like what?"

"Like death. I can see in your palm that someone's coming to kill you.

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Someone influenced by the novels of Ivan Turgenev. Someone who's an excellent marksman and a damn fine writer."

Aubrey feels his bowels turn into cold aspic. He's naked without a gunbelt. But he still appreciates the value of money, he'll get his thirty cents worth. He asks Rosa, "This someone, does he come alone?"

"No. I feel he's traveling with an older bearded man. An older man who distrusts all monistic absolutisms."

"Anyone else?"

"No. Just the two. Coming from the direction of the setting sun."

Aubrey knows the first man is Henry, the writer. The second could be either Frank or William. Both are good shots—maybe as good as Jesse. He can't remember if the subject of monistic absolutisms came up when they were planning bank jobs.

"Are they going to kill me?"

"They'll try. I think the younger one will succeed."

"But it's not certain?"

"Mister, if I thought the future was fixed, would I charge thirty cents trying to help people avoid it?"

Aubrey is relieved.

Outside the tent another wooden cobble rockets into the air.

The train stops around midnight to take on water and coal near the eastern Arizona border. Henry awakens. He's forgotten the photographer. Dammit. He'd promised John Singer Sargent pictures of the shootout. Henry wonders if they should call the whole thing off. They've done that too often waiting to the end of this novel or that book. Maybe they can hire a photographer in Amarillo. The train begins rolling.

Aubrey Sorrentino buys the swarthy man another watered whiskey. Four drunk cowpokes simulate a poker game near the saloon door. Aubrey shows the Romani a wad of bills. The outer bills are U.S. currency, the inner and more numerous are Confederate boodle. The Romani smiles and pulls a knife from his belt. He plunges the knife into a photo of Henry James, pinning it to their wobbly table. The chai has bad teeth. Aubrey buys the man a bottle and then heads back to his hotel.

Aubrey's sleep is fitful but no more fitful than any night since he shot Jesse. Phantoms of the remaining James brothers appear every night. Sometimes singly. Sometimes the whole gang: Frank James, William James, Henry James, Josiah Royce, Herman von Helmholtz, Williams Dean Howells, and Doc Holiday.

They'd had their petty revenges over the years, but now they were going for hot lead. Aubrey's cheeks still burn at the thought of Henry's devastating review of Aubrey's first novel, *Missouri Christmas,* in the

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North American Review. That review had closed publishers' doors on two continents. But he'd show them. He'd kept in shape and could outshoot all of them except maybe Frank or Henry.

The train pulls into Amarillo about an hour after dawn. The gypsy waits in the shadow of the depot. The James brothers step down. They travel light, only a bag apiece. Their eyes are as cold as an Amarillo winter. The gypsy draws his bowie knife, presses himself flat against the wooden frame of the station. The James brothers talk. William's going to rent a room. Henry's going to try getting a photographer. William walks southward and Henry walks northward, gypsyward.

The gypsy shifts slightly preparing to spring. Henry's predator hearing informs him. Henry drops the suitcase and jumps around the depot's corner facing the gypsy. The gypsy lunges, but Henry's gun is quicker. A bright red rose blooms in the gypsy's chest. Henry asks the falling man if he knows of any photographers working in the Amarillo area, but it is too late. Henry pauses to cut another notch in his pistol grip.

The dining room of the Amarillo Hotel opens onto the main lobby. Aubrey sits, back against the wall, watching the lobby and shoveling down biscuits and gravy. Aubrey chokes as William walks in. William turns without breaking his stride and flashes Aubrey a huge smile. Aubrey knows how George Armstrong Custer, old Yellow Hair himself, felt when he looked up the canyon walls at Little Bighorn.

William signs in. The manager says, "Gee, Mr. James, it's an honor to have you and your brother here. I surely enjoyed *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*."

"Thanks," says William.

William pages back through the hotel's register until he finds Aubrey Sorrentino. He draws a line through the name and writes in Robert Ford. He pushes the register back to the manager. The manager's eyes widen but he says nothing, only (and almost imperceptibly) nods.

Robert Ford runs up to his room for the security of his guns. Later on he will almost shoot a chambermaid.

William makes himself comfortable in his fourth-floor room. He sips on the glass of buttermilk he'd got in the dining room. About eleven, Henry comes in. From Henry's haggard hangdog look, William knows there's not a photographer to be had.

When noon comes, the James brothers go to the wide porch of the hotel. William pulls a revolver and motions everybody off the street. It's quiet and hot. William steps into the street and shouts, "Robert Ford, I am calling you out."

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The waiting is intolerable.

Then Ford appears in an all-black outfit. His black Stetson is edged with Mexican silver. He walks calmly out of the hotel, nodding amicably to Henry, who sits on a bench. He steps off the porch. His eyes lock on William with rattlesnake intensity.

He goes for his gun.

As William goes for his gun, one of the rain-soaked wooden cobbles shoots into the air between him and Ford. William shoots the cobble. He has a flash of satori concerning human cognitive processes.

Robert isn't distracted. His bullet tears into William just below the rib cage.

Robert wheels and fires at Henry. Henry's on his feet shooting. Robert misses. Henry doesn't.

Henry runs to his dying brother.

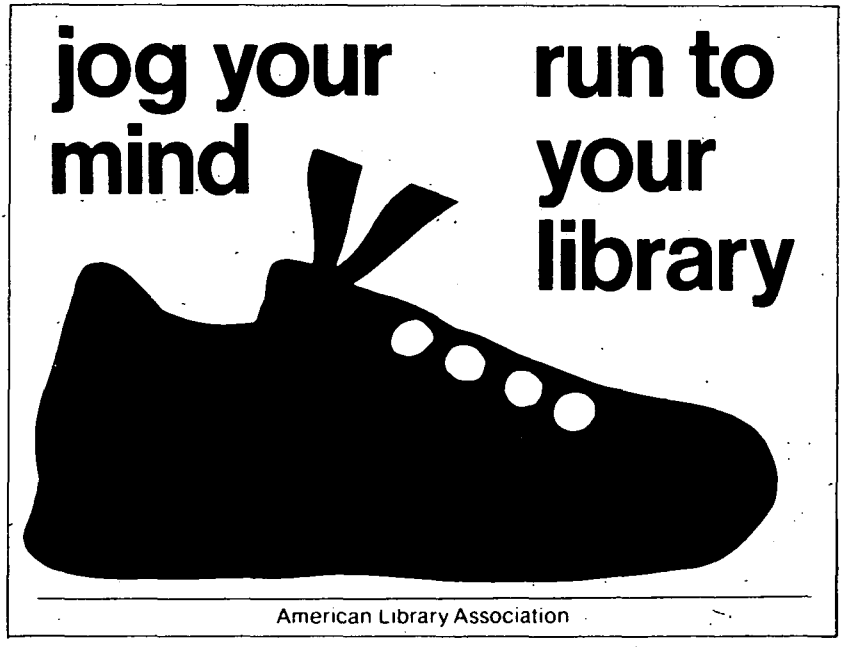
He says, "William, you've got to make it."

"I'm a goner. But we got him. We got Ford."

"I don't want to lose two brothers to Ford."

"Get Frank out of retirement. Get him to take up my career so I can be remembered. In my bag I've got some notes on the variety of religious experience he should find invaluable." William's breathing stops.

Henry stands. The silence is deafening. ●



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MACHINES OF LOVING GRACE

There was an obituary in the business section
that touched me more than those of most humans:
the last manual typewriter made in America
rolled off an assembly line at Smith-Corona
and was presented to some bigwig
in a light-hearted ceremony.

Thus we condemn generations
who will have to try to think
while machines hum *Get busy! Get busy!*—
while cursors blink with mindless patience,
while screens fill up with easy blather.

I look around at my friends:
the stolid Olympia that does the daily work
the wide-carriage Remington with the soft touch
the Royal, sixty years old, China Red Art Deco
(my favorite, machine of loving grace)
the Olivetti Valentine, also red, high-impact plastic
(throw it under an airplane seat and go!)

No wires
No batteries
No impatient noise

All of them ready
to write anything, anywhere
without moving one single damned electron.

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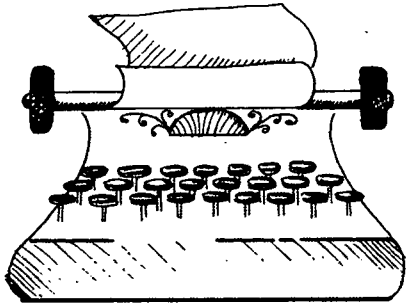
And so I see some future
where a few of us old codgers
trade secrets for cutting out ribbons and inking them
trade parts as our machines give way to entropy

and keep on typing noisily along
(with blessed silence in between the phrases)
while all you others

tap on your humming Selectrics
caress the Apple keyboard
play with your Wangs

and never know the simple joy
of pounding keys
to push the right word into place.

—Joe Haldeman



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art: Laura Lakey

PRESENTS OF MIND

by Edward Bryant, Connie Willis, Dan Simmons, and Steve Rasnic Tem

Four distinguished science fiction writers have joined their considerable talents to produce these tales of some rather unusual presents . . .

PROLOGUE

by Edward Bryant

"People are just no damned good," she said.

"You've been saying that for a good many thousands of years," said the other. Both of them gazed down at the world and the millennia spread beneath them. It was a fine view, he thought, but it did get old. Novelty—twists in the game—were always welcome.

"I gave them so much," she said, shaking her head. "Did they learn from adversity and misfortune? Did they improve their lots in life?" She pursed her lips. "Nooooo."

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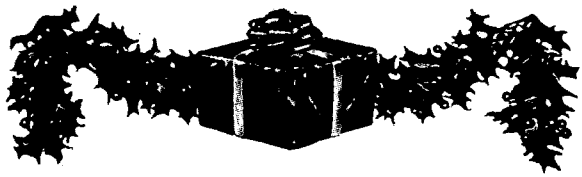

"I think maybe you're unduly harsh." He idly traced the ebb and flow of the cloud-cover over the blue globe as the seasons flew by. Time past? Time future? Was he observing the record of history or was he a participant in the experiment itself? He shook his head. Metaphysics had never been his strong point. He was the product of a less complicated time.

"I guess what I mean is, I'm bored." She shook her head violently. The cloud of hair, of a softness and beauty that human beings had once worshipped, flew about her face. Her beauty was not enhanced by petulance.

"So? What do you suggest?"

"I don't know," she said morosely. "I'm all out of ideas."

As if you ever had an original thought. . . . He didn't say that aloud. Instead he pointed down at the abode of men. And women, he reminded himself. They were getting *so* picky about terminology. "I've got a suggestion," he said. The globe wobbled across the equinox. "Christmas is coming."

"So?" she said again, shrugging. "The birthday party of some *nouveau-divinité* is of no importance to me."

"The game, love. Just think of it as part of the game. After all, you're the bored one."

She nodded, waiting for him to explain.

He gestured downward. "I gather from what you said earlier that you have no great faith in their best instincts."

"You know that." She batted long lashes.

The other said, "I possess more faith. We'll have a little wager, then." He considered the scenes below carefully. "I've always enjoyed the innovation of exchanged gifts under an evergreen. Both of us will collaborate in creating some presents for their holidays. We shall see what happens when those gifts are delivered. But other than that act, no intercession, agreed?"

"All right." She smiled for the first time in a long while. "And the stakes?"

It was his turn to shrug. "Do we require anything more than the joy of experimental answers?"

Her smile became less pleasant. "I'm getting tired of the game. I've been tired for a long time. If they screw up, then I say we kill them. Kill them all."

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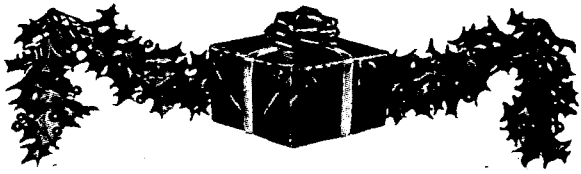

"I'm not so sure that's a good—"

"It's what I want," she said. "And if you won't do it, I'll simply give them what they need to do it themselves." Her voice was adamant.

He silently appraised her for a long time. Her beauty was breathtaking. "Agreed," he finally said. Why not humor her, he thought.

"Goody!" She clapped her hands together, eyes shining as they hadn't for centuries. "Let's give them things."

"Yes," he said, mind wandering downward to the Earth. "Let's."

THE PONY

by Connie Willis

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" Suzy demanded. Barbara obediently pulled off the red-and-green plaid bow, bracing herself for the twinge of disappointment she always felt when she opened Christmas presents.

"I always just tear the paper, Aunt Barbara," Suzy said. "I picked out this present all by myself. I knew what you wanted from the Macy's parade when your hands got so cold."

Barbara got the package open. Inside was a pair of red-and-purple striped mittens. "It's just what I wanted. Thank you, Suzy," she said. She pointed at the pile of silver boxes under the tree. "One of those is for you, I think."

Suzy dived under the tree and began digging through the presents.

"She really did pick them out all by herself," Ellen whispered, a smile quirking the corners of her mouth. "As you could probably tell by the colors."

Barbara tried on the mittens. I wonder if Joyce got gloves, she thought. At her last session Joyce had told Barbara that her mother always got her gloves, even though she hated gloves and her mother knew it. "I gave one of my patients your phone number," Barbara said to Ellen. "I hope you don't mind."

"Just a little," said her sister. Barbara clenched her mittened fist.

Suzy dumped a silver box with a large blue bow on it in Barbara's lap. "Does this one say, 'To Suzy'?" she asked.

Barbara unfolded the silver card. "It says, 'To Suzy from Aunt Barbara.' " Suzy began tearing at the paper.

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"Why don't you open it on the floor?" Ellen said, and Suzy snatched the package off Barbara's lap and dropped to the floor with it.

"I'm really worried about this patient," Barbara said. "She's spending Christmas at home with an unhappy, domineering mother."

"Then why did she go home?"

"Because she's been indoctrinated to believe that Christmas is a wonderful, magical time when everyone is happy and secret wishes can come true," Barbara said bitterly.

"A baseball shirt," Suzy said happily. "I bet now those boys at my preschool will let me play ball with them." She pulled the striped Yankees shirt on over her red nightgown.

"Thank goodness you were able to find the shirt," Ellen said softly. "I don't know what she would have done if she hadn't gotten one. It's all she's talked about for a month."

I don't know what my patient will do either, Barbara thought. Ellen put another red-and-green package in her lap, and she opened it, wondering if Joyce was opening her presents. At Joyce's last session she had talked about how much she hated Christmas morning, how her mother always found fault with all her presents, saying they didn't fit or were the wrong color or that she already had one.

"Your mother's using her presents to express the dissatisfaction she feels with her own life," Barbara had told her. "Of course, everyone feels some disappointment when they open presents. It's because the present is only a symbol for what the person really wants."

"Do you know what I want for Christmas?" Joyce had said as though she hadn't heard a word. "A ruby necklace."

The phone rang. "I hope this isn't your patient," Ellen said, and went into the hall to answer it.

"What does this present say?" Suzy said. She was standing holding another present, a big one with cheap, garish Santa Clauses all over it.

Ellen came back in, smiling. "Just a neighbor calling to wish us a merry Christmas. I was afraid it was your patient."

"So was I," Barbara said. "She's talked herself into believing that she's getting a ruby necklace for Christmas, and I'm very worried about her emotional state when she's disappointed."

"I can't read, you know," Suzy said loudly, and they both laughed. "Does this present say 'To Suzy'?"

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"Yes," Ellen said, looking at the tag, which had a Santa Claus on it. "But it doesn't say who it's from. Is this from you, Barbara?"

"It's ominous," Suzy said. "We had ominous presents at my preschool."

"Anonymous," Ellen said, untaping the tag and looking on the back. "They had a gift exchange. I wonder who sent this. Mom's bringing her presents over this afternoon, and Jim decided to wait and give her his when she goes down there next weekend. Go ahead and open it, honey, and when we see what it is, maybe we'll know who it's from." Suzy knelt over the box and started tearing at the cheap paper. "Your patient thinks she's getting a ruby necklace?" Ellen said.

"Yes, she saw it in a little shop in the Village, and last week when she went in there again, it was gone. She's convinced someone bought it for her."

"Isn't it possible someone did?"

"Her family lives in Pennsylvania, she has no close friends, and she

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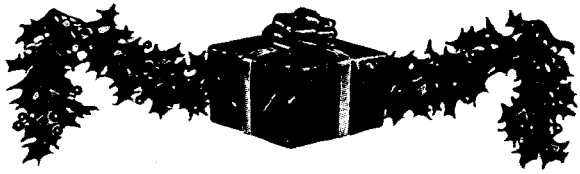

didn't tell anybody she wanted it."

"Did you buy her the necklace?" Suzy said. She was tearing busily at the Santa Claus paper.

"No," Barbara said to Ellen. "She didn't even tell me about the necklace until after it was gone from the shop, and the last thing I'd want to do would be to encourage her in her mother's neurotic behavior pattern."

"I would buy her the necklace," Suzy said. She had all the paper off and was lifting the lid off a white box. "I would buy it and say, 'Surprise!' "

"Even if she got the necklace, she'd be disappointed in it," Barbara said, feeling obscurely angry at Suzy. "The necklace is only a symbol for a subconscious wish. Everyone has those wishes: to go back to the womb, to kill our mothers and sleep with our fathers, to die. The conscious mind is terrified of those wishes, so it substitutes something safer—a doll or a necklace."

"Do you really think it's that ominous?" Ellen asked, the corners of her mouth quirking again. "Sorry, I'm starting to sound like Suzy. Do you really think it's that serious? Maybe your patient really wants a ruby necklace. Didn't you ever want something really special that you didn't tell anybody about? You did. Don't you remember that year you wanted a pony and you were so disappointed?"

"I remember," Barbara said.

"Oh, it's just what I wanted!" Suzy said so breathlessly that they both looked over at her. Suzy pulled a doll out of a nest of pink tissue and held it out at arm's length. The doll had a pink ruffled dress, yellow curls, and an expression of almost astonishing sweetness. Suzy stared at it as if she were half afraid of it. "It is," she said in a hushed tone. "It's just what I wanted."

"I thought you said she didn't like dolls," Barbara said.

"I thought she didn't. She didn't breathe a word of this." Ellen picked up the box and rustled through the pink tissue paper, looking for a card. "Who on earth do you suppose sent it?"

"I'm going to call her Letitia," Suzy said. "She's hungry. I'm going to go feed her breakfast." She went off into the kitchen, still holding the doll carefully away from her.

"I had no idea she wanted a doll," Ellen said as soon as she was out of sight. "Did she say anything when you took her to Macy's?"

"No," Barbara said, wadding the wrapping paper in her lap into a ball.

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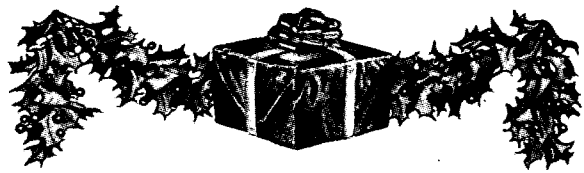

"We never even went near the dolls. She wanted to look at baseball bats."

"Then how did you know she wanted a doll?"

Barbara stopped with her hands full of paper and plaid ribbon. "I didn't send her the doll," she said angrily. "I bought her the Yankees shirt, remember?"

"Then who sent it to her?"

"How would I know? Jim maybe?"

"No. He's getting her a catcher's mitt."

The phone rang. "I'll get it," Barbara said. She crammed the red paper into a box and went into the hall.

"I just had to call you!" Joyce shouted at her. She sounded nearly hysterical.

"I'm right here," she said soothingly. "I want you to tell me what's upsetting you."

"I'm not upset!" Joyce said. "You don't understand! I got it!"

"The ruby necklace?" Barbara said.

"At first I thought I hadn't gotten it, and I was trying to be cheerful about it even though my mother hated everything I got her and she gave me gloves again, and then, when almost all the presents had been passed out, there it was, in this little box, all wrapped in Santa Claus paper. There was a little tag with a Santa Claus on it, too, and it said, 'To Joyce.' It didn't say who it was from. I opened it, and there it was. It's just what I wanted!"

"Surprise, Aunt Barbara," Suzy said, feeding a cookie shaped like a Santa Claus to her doll.

"I'll wear the necklace to my next session so you can see it," Joyce said, and hung up.

"Barbara," Ellen's voice called from the living room. "I think you'd better come in here."

Barbara took hold of Suzy's hand and walked into the living room. Ellen was wrestling with a package wrapped in gaudy Santa Claus paper. It was wedged between the Christmas tree and the door. Ellen was behind it, trying to straighten the tree.

"Where did this come from?" Barbara said.

"It came in the mail," Suzy said. She handed Barbara her doll and clambered up on the couch to get to the small tag taped on top.

"There isn't any mail on Christmas," Barbara said.

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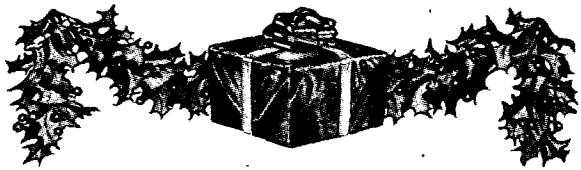

Ellen squeezed past the tree and around to where Barbara was standing. "I hope it's not a pony," she said, and the corners of her mouth quirked. "It's certainly big enough for one."

Suzy climbed back down, handed Barbara the tag, and took her doll back. Barbara held it a little away from her, as if she were afraid of it. The tag had a Santa Claus on it. It read, "To Barbara." The present was big enough to be a pony. Or something worse. Something only your subconscious knew you wanted. Something too frightening for your conscious mind to even know it wanted.

"It's an ominous present," Suzy said. "Aren't you going to open it?"

VEXED TO NIGHTMARE BY A ROCKING CRADLE

by Dan Simmons

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob brought the Word to the New Yorkers on the eve of Christmas Eve, paddling his long dugout canoe east up the Forty-second Street Confluence and then north, against the tide, up Fifth Avenue, past the point where the roof of the Public Library glowed greenly under the surface of the darkening waters. It was a cold but peaceful evening. The sunset was red and beautiful—as all sunsets had been for the two-and-a-half decades since the Big Mistake of '88—and cooking fires had been lit on the many tiers and tops of shattered towers rising from the dark sea like the burned-out cypress stumps Brother remembered from the swamps of his childhood.

Brother paddled carefully, aware of the difficulty of handling the long canoe and even more aware of the precious cargo he had brought so far through so much. Behind him, nestled across the thwarts like some great cooking pot, lay the Sacred Dish, its God's Ear raised to the burning sky as if already poised to catch the first emanations from the Holy Beamer that Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob had left in Dothan, Alabama, fourteen months earlier. Set behind the Sacred Dish, crated and cradled, was the

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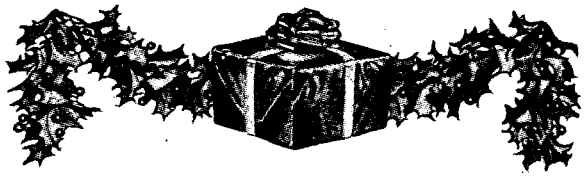

Holy Tube, and behind it, wrapped in clear plastic, sat the Lord's Bike. The Coleman generator was set near the bow, partially blocking Brother's vision but balancing the weight of the cargo of sacred relics astern.

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob paddled north past the trellised remnants of Rockefeller Center and the ragged spire of St. Patrick's. There were dozens of occupied towers in this section of Rimwall Bay, hundreds of fires twinkling on the vined and rusted ruins above him, but Brother ignored them and paddled purposefully northward to 666 Fifth Avenue.

The building still stood—at least thirty-five floors of it, twenty-eight still above the water line—and Brother let the long dugout drift near the base of it. He stood—balancing carefully and shifting the weight of the Heckler and Koch HK 91 Semi-Automatic Christian Survival Network Assault Rifle across his back—raising his arms high, hands empty. Shadowed figures looked down from gaps in dark glass. Somewhere a baby cried and was hushed.

"I bring you glad tidings of Christ's Resurrection!" shouted Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob. His voice echoed off water and steel. "Good News of your coming Salvation from tribulations and woe!"

There was a silence and then a voice called down. "Who do you seek?"

"I seek the eldest Clan. That with the strongest totem so that I may bring gifts and the Word of the Lord from the True Church of Christ Assuaged."

The echoes lasted several seconds and the silence longer. Then a woman's voice from higher up called, "That be our Red Bantam Clan. Be welcome, stranger, and know that we already have the word of God here. Join us. Share our fire and preparations for the Holy Day."

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob nodded and moved the canoe in to tie up to a rusted girder. The Holy Spirit had not yet spoken to him. He did not know how the Way would be prepared. He did know that within forty-eight hours they would be ready to murder him or to worship him. He would allow neither.

All through the day of Christmas Eve they worked to raise the gift of the Sacred Dish to the rooftop. The stairwells were too small and the

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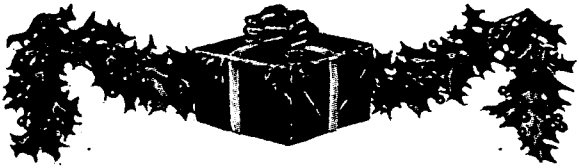

elevator shafts too cluttered with rope ladders, pulleys, lift baskets, and vines. Brother supervised the arrangement of block and tackle to raise the Dish the two-hundred-fifty feet to the top of the building. The three flights of stairs above the occupied twenty-fifth floor were perilous even for the cliffdwellers of the Red Bantam Clan. Brother had insisted that they improve the way up the cluttered staircase. "We will be coming up here often once the Holy Beamer connects you with the Word," he said. "And so will be other Clans of the Rimwall Trading League. The way must be cleared so that the youngest and the eldest of these can easily make the climb."

Old McCarty, the wrinkled matriarch of the Red Bantam Clan, had

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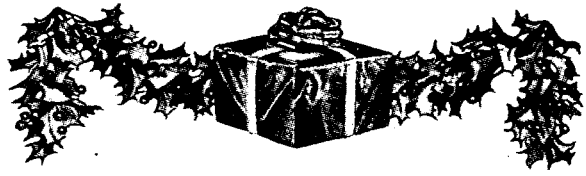

shrugged and directed a group of women to carry out repairs in the stairwell while the men raised the Sacred Dish.

By the time the sunset streaked the heavens red, all was in place: the Sacred Dish was firmly affixed atop the highest section of rooftop, the God's Ear was aimed as carefully as Brother's skills and his rusty sextant would allow, the Formica altar was set in place below the Dish, and cables ran down to the Clan's Common Room on the twenty-fifth floor. The generator was in place there and the strongest Clan Hunters had been appointed to take turns on the Lord's Bike for the sunrise services.

Tara, the elf-faced five-year-old, tugged at Brother's coat as he was setting away his plastic buckets. "It's almost dark," she said. "Will you come with us to see the tree and open presents?"

"Yes," said Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob. He glanced at the red-dyed bantam tattoo on the back of the child's hand. "And I will give the sermon."

The room was very large, the walls were coated with soot from cooking fires, and the rotted carpets had been covered with rush mats. The seventeen members of the Red Bantam Clan gathered around the Holy Tube and the small aluminum Christmas tree near the hearth. Candles glowed. A child's paper star decorated the top of the tree. Brother looked at the small scattering of crudely wrapped presents under the tree and closed his eyes.

Old McCarty cleared her throat. The tiny bantam tattoo on her forehead glowed redly in the candlelight. "Beloved Clan," she said, "it is our custom to give thanks to God on this most sacred of nights, and then to open our presents that Santa has brought. But this year our Brother from the Dothan True Church has arrived. . . ." She paused, swallowed as if tasting something bitter, and finished. "Who will now tell us of tomorrow's celebration and read from the Word of God."

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob moved into the open area in front of the tree and set his HK 91 against the table, within easy reach. He took his worn CSN Bible from his pack and set it on top of the Holy Tube. "Brothers and Sisters in Christ," he said. "Tomorrow morning, when the sun rises and the Way is purified, the Holy Beamer will cast its light into darkness, and once again you will hear the Word and become part of the

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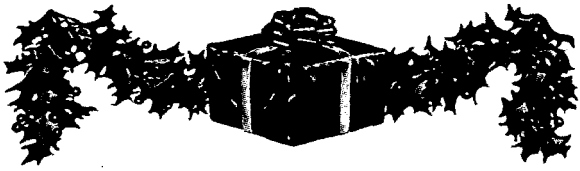

True Church of Jesus Christ Assuaged. My trip here has not been an easy one. The Enemy was active. Five of my Brothers in Christ died so that I might arrive here." Brother stopped and looked at the faces in front of him. Old McCarty was frowning, the men were staring with interest or indifference, and many of the women and children were looking at him with an awe bordering on reverence.

"The time of Tribulations has come upon us and been long and heavy," Brother said at last. "But from this chosen place, the True Word—as spoken by Our Savior through the Eight Evangelists—will be heard again and will spread throughout the land." He paused again and looked at the faces lit by candlelight. Some of the children's gazes were drifting to the presents.

"Listen to what is written," Brother said and opened the Bible. "Revelation 13:16, 17—'And he causes all, small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a MARK in their right hand, or in their foreheads: and than no man might buy or sell, save that he has the MARK, or the name of the beast, or the numbers of a man: and his number is six hundred, threescore and six.' "

There was a slight stirring in the crowd. Brother turned the page and read aloud again without once glancing down at the text. " 'Revelation 14:9-11,' " he said. " 'If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink the wine of the wrath of God; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torments ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they rest no day or night, who worship the beast and image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.' "

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob closed his eyes and smiled. "But I read to you also from John 3:16, 17," he said. " 'I find no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.' " Brother opened his eyes and said, "Amen."

"Amen," said Old McCarty. "Let's see what Santa brought us this year."

Conversation and laughter resumed. Tara cuddled next to Brother as the Clan gathered around the tree. "I'm afraid you won't have a present," said Tara. Tears filled her eyes. "Santa brought the presents on the

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second Sunday of Advent. I guess he didn't know you were coming."

"It doesn't matter," said Brother. "The tree and presents are pagan customs. There is no Santa Claus."

The girl blinked but her nine-year-old brother Sean chimed in, "He's right, Tarie. Uncle Lou and the hunters get this stuff when they make the November voyage to the warehouse. They keep it hidden up on the twenty-seventh floor. I've *seen* it."

Tara blinked again and said in a small voice, "Santa brought me this doll that I just got. Sometimes he comes back on Christmas Eve to bring us canned fruit. Maybe he'll bring you something if he does. You can share my doll 'til then if you want."

Brother shook his head.

"Hey, look!" cried Sean. "There *is* an extra present." He scrambled under the tree and came up with a blue-wrapped box. "I bet it's extra 'cause Uncle Henry died last month an' they forgot not to put it out."

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob started to return the present to its place but the Holy Spirit spoke to him then and he began to tremble violently. A hush fell on the group and the Clan watched as Brother calmed himself, tore off the wrapping, lifted a leather sheath from the box, and exposed a long blade to the light.

"Wow!" breathed Sean. He grabbed a yellowed pamphlet from the box and read aloud. " 'Congratulations. You are now the proud owner of a Christian Survival Network LINAL M-20 Survival Knife. Each LINAL M-20 is a whopping twelve inches long and yet is so perfectly balanced that it cuts and thrusts like an ex . . . exten . . . *extension* of your own hand. The LINAL M-20 blade is crafted entirely of 420 mo . . . molecular stainless steel and is tough enough to split wood or shatter bone. In the pom . . . pommel . . . of your LINAL M-20 is a precision RX-360 Liquid Damped Compass. Unscrew the compass and you will find a complete Survival Network Kit including a packet of waterproof wrapped matches, half-a-dozen fishing hooks, sinkers, nylon test fishing line, a sewing needle kit, an 18-inch cable saw capable of cutting down a small tree, and, of course, a copy of the CSN Miniaturized Bible.' " The boy shook his head and exhaled. "Wow," he said again.

Old McCarty also shook her head and looked at Lou, the eldest of the hunters. "I don't remember that being in the warehouse load," she said sharply. The hunter shrugged and said nothing.

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Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob slipped the knife in its sheath and the sheath in his belt. He listened as the last whispers of the Holy Spirit faded away. He smiled at the group. "I will go now to the rooftop to prepare the Way," he said softly. "In the morning we will gather to hear the Word."

He had turned to go when he felt Tara's small hand tugging at his pantleg. "Will you come and tuck us in first?" she asked.

Brother glanced at Rita, the girl's mother. The young woman took her children's hands and nodded shyly. Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob followed them toward the dark hallway.

The children's bedroom had been a book storage room for the publishing company that had once had offices on the floor. While the children slipped into their bedrolls, Brother looked at the shelves of rotting books, each one marked with the small red bantam emblem.

Rita kissed her children goodnight and stepped into the hall.

"Will you be up on the roof all night?" Tara asked Brother. The child was hugging her new cloth doll to her in the tumble of rags that made up her bed.

"Yes," said Brother, stepping back into the room.

"Then you'll see Santa and his reindeer land when he comes back," she said excitedly.

Brother started to speak and then stopped. He smiled. "Yes," he said. "I imagine I will."

"But you said . . ." began Sean.

"Anyone up on the roof tonight would see Santa Claus and his reindeer," Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob said firmly.

"Now let's say our prayers," said the children's mother.

Tara, with eyes still wide, nodded and looked down. "God bless Mommy, and Old 'Em, and the ghosts of Daddy and Uncle Henry," she said.

"Amen," said Sean.

"No," said Brother. "There is a new prayer."

"Tell us," said both children.

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John," he said. "Bless the beds that we lay on." He waited while the two repeated the rhyme and then he went on. "Jim and Tammy, Jan and Paul," he said. "Find the demons, smite them all."

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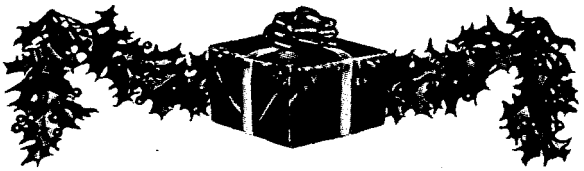

The children recited flawlessly and Tara said, "Will you really see Santa?"

"Yes," said Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob. "And goodnight."

Brother looked in on the Clan before going to the roof. A small group had been huddled near the tree, murmuring, listening to Old McCarty, but the hunters scattered under Brother's gaze and went to their bedrolls. The matriarch stood and returned Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob's stare for a long moment but then she too looked down and moved away, just an old woman shuffling off to bed.

On the rooftop, Brother kneeled at the Formica altar and prayed loudly for several minutes. Finally he stood and removed all of his clothing. It was very cold. Moonlight reflected off his pale flesh and the curve of the Sacred Dish. Brother took out the plastic buckets and set them beneath the four corners of the altar. Then he removed the long knife from its sheath, held it high in both hands until the steel caught the cold light, and clamped it between his teeth.

Brother moved silently across the rooftop until he blended into the shadows near the head of the stairwell. He knelt there, at first feeling the rooftop gravel against his bare knee and tasting the cold steel in his mouth; then feeling nothing but the rising exaltation.

It did not take long. First came the gentle noises from the stairwell, then the shadowy figure emerged from the darkness, and finally came the soft voice. "Brother Jimmy-Joe?"

So it was not to be the old woman, thought Brother. So be it.

"Brother Jimmy-Joe?" The small figure moved toward the altar. Moonlight touched the dark braid of the doll's hair. "Santa?"

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob said a silent prayer, removed the blade from his teeth, and moved forward softly and swiftly to celebrate the coming day.

BUZZ

by Steve Rasnic Tem

He felt a trembling in his ears, like the passage of warm breath, and a buzzing high inside his brain, as if a tiny but persistent voice were trapped there.

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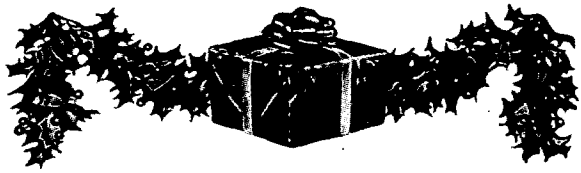

"Paul, please."

"I'm up, dammit." After a few more minutes he kicked off the covers and rolled out of bed.

"The kids want you there when they open presents."

Paul had heard Alice cajole and threaten the three children all morning about how they *had* to wait, but he said nothing.

Annie got the usual assortment of dolls, with the celebrity addition this year of a Cabbage Patch Kid. Richard got a train set, a microscope, Lincoln Logs, GI Joe paraphernalia, the Christmas release accessories for his Masters of the Universe collection, and assorted other vicious personae. Their oldest, Willy, got cash and a motorbike, something else Paul had disapproved of but had been skillfully pressured into accepting.

The kids' gifts were a bit stereotyped: he and his wife had finally given up on arranging for Santa to deliver "cross-gender" presents. This was the stuff they really wanted. But Paul found himself unable, as yet, to stop hoping their tastes in heroes and role-models might change. For now, any crudely-drawn animated figure with a good merchandizing arrangement might dazzle them.

The expensive motorized Erector set he'd bought Willy, on his own initiative, lay forgotten in its box, shrouded in white tissue.

"Kids have changed, Paul," Alice whispered behind him. "They don't always go for the toys their parents treasured as children."

He turned around. His wife wore her *Didn't I tell you?* look.

Paul shrugged. "I just wanted to please him . . . and please myself, too, I guess."

Annie was completely enthralled with her Cabbage Patch doll.

"Now, sit here, Lillie Beth. I don't want you fallin' off the table and gettin' hurted." Propped up on the table, the doll looked dim-witted. The expression on its face reminded Paul of a mutant biscuit. "Oh, I know," Annie said suddenly, "you want to go for a walk by the railroad tracks." Annie hopped the doll over the carpeting, slamming its feet down so hard the legs bent grotesquely. Richard aimed his rocket launchers their way and made popping noises, much to Annie's dismay. *"Leave* my baby *alone!"* She let the doll fall over onto the tracks. "Oh, my baby," she cried theatrically. "She's caught on the railroad thing!"

Richard, eager to play along, ran over to the train transformer and turned it on. Annie stood a few feet away, waiting, then suddenly ran

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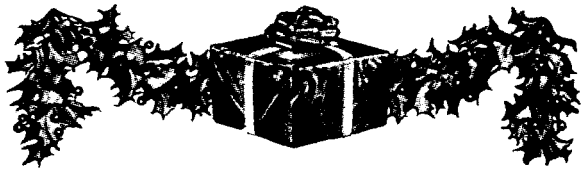

toward the tracks. "I'll save you, Lillie Beth!" and picked up the doll before the train arrived.

As a child, Paul had always pretended to be his own father in such heroic games, playing out the John Wayne role. His father had been as distant and mysterious to him as these plastic heroes must be to his own kids.

He stood by the window, staring at the burned-out husk of the Reynolds house across the street. Two weeks ago Jay Reynolds had carried two of his children out of that fire, to safety. He was burnt over thirty percent of his body, Paul had heard. The neighbors seemed to be feeling a mixture of awe and abhorrence toward the man. Consequently, no one had visited Reynolds as yet.

He imagined a truck careening across his front yard, and his last minute dive and tackle that saved Annie and her doll.

He imagined Richard caught in a gas explosion, and his futile efforts to save his son dissolving within the flames.

Paul was always one of the last to open his presents. Not so much because he had grown disenchanted with Christmas—which he had—but because the kids' gifts blocked most of the tree and he had a hard time finding any marked for him.

He thought he'd opened them all—thanking his brood for socks and ties and belts and a heavy robe and two sets of metric wrenches—when Richard pulled out a small package from under the backside of the tree. "One more, Dad."

Richard brought it over and dropped it into his lap. The packaging was interesting: it looked like metallic red foil, but felt more like plastic. A small plastic card with his name in crisp black lettering graced the front. The wrapping was fastened in back by what looked like an irregular round seal of the same material as the wrapping.

"Who's it from?" He looked around the living room.

Everyone denied knowledge of it. Finally his wife said, "It's probably from one of your friends. They must have slipped it behind the tree during the party last night."

Paul gazed at the tree. Impossible. There'd been far too many packages piled in front for anyone to slip back there. He lifted the front of the card. Inside, in the same black lettering as his name, were the words:

WHAT YOU WANTED

He turned the package over and tried to peel the seal off with his

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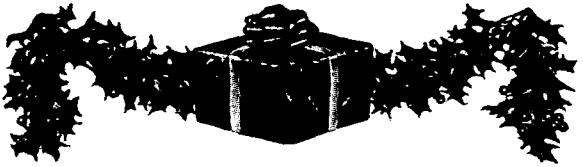

fingernail. It didn't budge to his efforts, but then suddenly the wrapping straightened out, the sides of the box hinged, and a small object tumbled to the carpet.

Paul picked it up carefully. It was a miniature sculpture of some sort of fantastic insect, done in something like brass, something like copper, with jeweled eyes and a highly-burnished thorax.

"How cute!" Alice cried. Paul found he couldn't say anything for the moment.

"I think it's some sort of fancy Christmas tree ornament," he finally said. It was delicate, and so precise in its details that he wondered whether it was an exact replica of some exotic species of insect.

"Whatcha gonna do with it, Daddy?" Annie asked, without taking her eyes off her Cabbage Patch doll.

"Hang it on the tree," he said, almost laughing because of the sudden giddiness he was feeling.

He walked over to the tree and, reaching as far as he could, placed it near the top. He stepped back to admire it. It was amazing, the way its shiny surfaces caught the multicolored lights and seemed to blend them, hold them fast within its metal.

"Ooooh, pretty," Annie said.

"Yes. It *is* nice," Paul said proudly.

A couple of hours after lunch Paul was sitting by himself in the living room, gazing at his ornament, drinking again. He'd needed a break. Annie had temporarily lost one of her dolls (it would show up a couple of days later behind a piece of furniture), and Richard had broken one of the GI Joe pieces and lost several of the smaller "personal accessories" (which would *not* be found). Both were upstairs in their rooms, crying.

He looked at the bottle. Rolling Rock, the last of the year's stock. Maybe he'd had too much; his ears felt tender, ringing.

He looked up at the tree and watched as the ornament moved several inches to devour the head of a tinsel-haired angel. He put down his drink. The tree began to rustle, sprinkling dry pine needles out on his rug.

"Alice!" he shouted.

A few agonizing minutes later, during which Paul watched the ornament wander around the tree, disturbing ornaments, slipping garlands from branches, and chewing needles, Alice and the kids ran into the room, surrounding him, prodding him, asking what was wrong.

"The tree," he said, still watching it. "That *insect!*"

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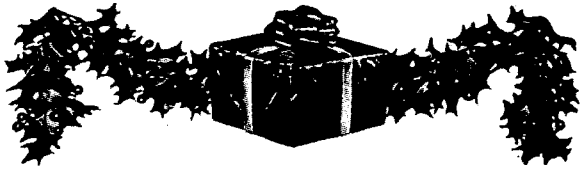

Alice walked over and began picking up the dislodged ornaments. "That cat!" she said. "You'd think after all these years she'd know better." She brushed the back of her hand through the branches. "I'm sorry, Paul. Looks like she knocked your new ornament somewhere."

Willy rolled his eyes in exaggerated fashion. "Jees, Dad. Thought it was a fire or something."

Paul just looked at the boy.

Paul went into the bedroom and got his nine iron out of the golf bag. The rest of the afternoon he wandered the house with it. He didn't find the thing. Just before dinner he put the club away.

Alice had gone all out on the dinner—both turkey and ham, broccoli in cheese sauce, deviled eggs, all his favorites. Annie had brought her Cabbage Patch Kid to the dinner table, where she'd set up a highchair for the thing. Paul was in a good enough mood that it didn't bother him,

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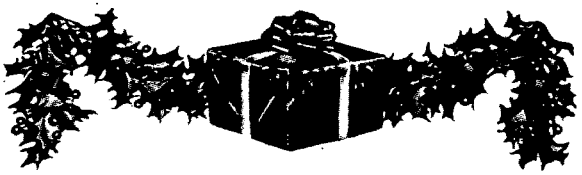

even when she pretended to feed it, and cheese sauce dripped over its chin.

As he watched the thin yellow drool drop onto the front of the doll's dress, a narrow black line, so like a crack, spread across the puffed cheeks, the idiot eyes, joined five other similar cracks spreading from points around the doll's head, and then the insect's ragged mouth parts appeared over the top of the orange yarn hair, sharp-edged jowls gnawing through soft plastic.

Annie was reaching to stroke the doll's hair.

"No!" he screamed, jumping up from the chair, bathrobe flapping like a giant, awkward bird. He jerked the carving knife out of the turkey and plunged it into the doll's head, where the black lines had just disappeared.

The force of Paul's lunge dragged him off-balance, over the chair and onto the floor. He could feel the table rocking under his hip, everybody jumping away, shouting, dishes falling and breaking. From his vantage point on the floor he could see small discarded piles of broccoli, mashed potatoes, and ham, and a long, articulated black carapace snaking its way over the orange rug that led back into the living room.

Paul sat alone in the dark parlor, staring through the partially-open door at Richard running his train set around the coffee table. He'd been there since the knife incident, planning, weighing the risk of his family's lives (after all, he didn't know for sure the thing would hurt anyone) against the risk to his own reputation (which seemed irretrievably lost at this point). He'd had to listen while in the other room Alice tried to explain that their father had been under a lot of pressure lately, that he'd been drinking too much, and reassuring Annie that Lillie Beth wasn't really dead, just wounded, and after Mom took her away to the doctor for awhile she'd come back looking brand new. *(Oh, great, Alice,* he thought. *Do you really think a new doll will fool her?)*

The train started up again. Paul could hear the electrical hum of the engine, louder than he would have expected.

There was an eighth car at the end of the train. There'd been only seven when Richard first set it up. The box said seven. A shiny black tank car with dingy yellow headlights and slick piping and a long hard tail that drew sparks when it struck the track.

Paul came roaring out into the room, fish net held high, imagining

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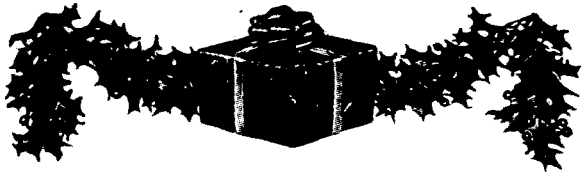

himself John Wayne, Indiana Jones, his father.

He scooped the net rapidly into the rear car, sending a chain of heavy plastic and cheap metal spinning over his son's head. He raised the net over his head triumphantly.

The black thing, a good thirty times larger than when he'd first seen it, snapped its back and hissed a stench from within the net. Then the net was tearing, and the collective voice of Paul's family was clawing at his ears.

A shelf ripped off the wall and swung with all his might didn't even slow the thing. Jagged glass, with Paul holding his foot on its back, didn't even scar.

Alice brought him a large pot. Paul slammed the mouth down over it. The black pot rocked, then flew off, cracking the plaster wall by the fireplace.

What next! What next! Paul began to imagine, and could not turn the imagining off. He started to cry, hating himself as the thing turned and turned on the living room rug, then flew toward Annie, glistening claws cocked, open.

"Daddy! Daddy! It's in my hair!" she screamed, and Paul could imagine no heroics, only a sick despair, as he heard his little girl wail and saw the dark fantasy of a spider, the cold fantasy of a serpent, the screaming fantasy of inhuman black appendage ripping through the yellow halo of her hair.

And looking around for something else to throw, to pry, or pound with, Paul spied the strange shiny wrap neatly stacked on top of all the others by the tree.

He didn't feel heroic as he lowered the shiny wrap over his sweet daughter's head, and felt the edges fold over the thing, the thing passively withdrawing inside the package, no more threat than an old man retiring early for the evening.

He felt like a fiend.

It was nearly dawn before Paul finally took his secret present out to the trash. There, with all the discarded wrappings and empty boxes promising more than a child was likely to receive, he placed the box, piling whatever he could on top, however unnecessary.

He glanced up and down the alley, with familiar backyards and fa-

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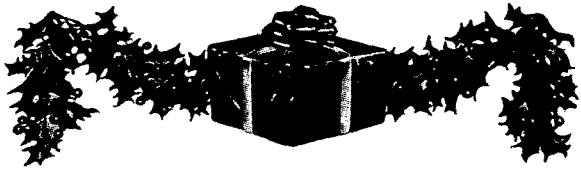

miliar trashbins ranked as far as he could see in the dim morning light. He watched his friends, the other fathers, trying to hide their own presents, their own imaginings, beneath mountains of trash. The sirens began.

EPILOGUE

by Edward Bryant

These were just a few of the gifts; a sampling of the recipients. The two of them allowed the game to go on for a hundred years.

"Enough?"

Actually neither one of them was sure who had said it. They exchanged looks, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

"Enough."

"Now what?"

He was sure it was the woman speaking. "You insisted on the wager," he said. "Which of us has won?"

"I—" There were lines in her face he was sure he had never seen before. "I don't know."

He smiled gently. "Then we should wait a bit. Think about this."

She slowly nodded. "I want to be by myself for a while. Just me. I want to rest."

He encouraged her. "Then go do it. We'll talk another time."

As she left, the woman said, "At least I gave some of them hope. That was good, wasn't it?"

He sighed a little in bemusement, having watched her come around nearly full circle. "That was good. Indeed, that was very good." He searched for madness in her eyes, but saw only exhaustion.

She nodded like a child. And was gone.

The other gazed at the place where she had been. Then raised his head to look into the invisible distance toward the place where the woman dwelled. He knew already what surprise awaited her there.

She was such a child. Now she would be struck for the moment speechless and without motion as she stared at the brightly wrapped parcel

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waiting for her. Now she would gasp with surprise and pleasure, picking the object up, prodding it, shaking it, listening with her ear pressed to one shining surface. Now she would impatiently tear at the binding cords, the flawless wrappings. Now she would open the package and—

He strained expectantly, all his senses acute. He thought he heard distant laughter. Or perhaps screaming.

"Merry Christmas, Pandora," he said, still smiling.

Until he turned and saw the object set squarely at his feet. The colors riveted his attention. The shape intrigued his mind. The mysteriousness of it—

Before he could think, he bent down and reached. He didn't know whether to laugh. Or scream. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

CHERRYH JUBILEE

Visible Light
By C. J. Cherryh
DAW, $3.50

C. J. Cherryh's *Visible Light* is more than a collection of short stories; it's something of a celebration of the author. It is presumably her portrait (in a space suit) on the cover, looking rather roguish. And there's a longish introduction, in which she carries on a dialogue with you, the hypothetical reader, and waxes serious about such things as art, science, history, and critics. One rises to the bait on the last subject: she has kind words for critics when they bring insight to the reader (oh, that there was insight to bring on every work reviewed!) and harsh words for the critic as faultfinder. (Agreed if there are no faults to find, but if there are, who else is going to point them out?—Only the rudest of readers tell an author of his/her goofs; of course, SF does have some of the rudest readers in Christendom.)

Alas, I feel remiss in not being able to find any great insights to share, nor great faults to find, in this collection of six stories (ranging from very short to very long). Cherryh is a dandy taleteller and a polished writer, and all these stories are worth reading. There's "Cassandra," which is about a contemporary crazy lady who is not crazy at all, but shares the legendary Cassandra's gift of foreseeing the future but not being believed. But what our time has to offer makes the foreseen Trojan War look like a picnic.

"The Threads of Time" is a bit of Cherryh's first novel, *Gate of Ivrel,* discarded from that work and reworked. "Companions" is the longest story, concerning a man marooned on a newly discovered planet by the death of his shipmates from an unknown disease. The world has no animal life, but plants aplenty. The human is left with the ship, which is sentient and commanded by the dying captain not to depart for fear of spreading the sickness. It has a robot-like extension of itself, and the odd couple develop a curious symbiotic relationship, but then another entity is discovered . . .

The prize of this bunch of Cherryhs, from my point of view, is the longish "The Brothers," that is the kind of fantasy that only Cherryh and Poul Anderson seem able to bring off. It is a tale of the Sidhe, the Celtic fairy-folk, and their relations with the humans who live

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to each side of their wood in Gleann Gleatharan, and what happens when a stranger comes to Dun Gorm and the King there hears the banshee wailing. (Now there's a bit of insight Cherryh brought to *me*—one of those etymological things I should have noticed years ago, and didn't. Sidhe is, of course, pronounced *shee,* and banshee is, in Cherryh's explanatory spelling, "bain Sidhe." Got it? There's also a pooka involved, and it's not one of your cutesy Irish pookas. This is the real thing—an inhuman, devious, and quite frightening shape changer.

"The Brothers" is the one previously unpublished story in the collection, but even if you've read all the others, it's worth the price of the book alone.

TABLE D'HOTE

The Planet On the Table
By Kim Stanley Robinson
Tor, $14.95

More short stories, these from one of the newer, hotter talents, Kim Stanley Robinson; the collection is called *The Planet On the Table.* The eight tales included are certainly varied and quirky; all previously published (the earliest in 1976). Locales include past and future, ranging from Venice to Mercury.

"Venice Drowned" is set in the Venice of the future. The city's periodic flooding disasters have finally overtaken her, in a period of deluge which apparently changed most of the world in 2040. What's left of Venice's population lives on the rooftops of the inundated city and her sunken treasures are plundered by international tourists.

"Black Air" tells of a young Moroccan shanghaied into the Spanish Armada, and his experiences during that disastrous expedition. It's very nicely written indeed, but its winning the World Fantasy Award is a little baffling, since the fantasy content seems to be limited to the hallucinations brought on the boy by disease and religion. One review suggests that it's an alternate-world Armada, but so far as my knowledge of the event goes, it sticks quite closely to the facts of history.

My favorite of the lot is "Mercurial," which is a sort of daffy murder mystery taking place on the planet Mercury, which several centuries hence has become a sort of cultural center for the Solar System. (Nice to get Mercury as a locale; seems to me it's been rather neglected lately.) It all has to do with a forged Monet (one of the Rouen cathedral series, no less), and is told by Nathaniel Sebastian, the friend of the indefatigable amateur sleuth, Freya Grindavik. Nathaniel "watsons" for Freya (Robinson's verb, not mine), but while there's a good deal of Holmes-sweet-Holmes to Freya (she analyzes paint like a demon), one is equally reminded of the English comedy of manners of the 1920s, such as E. F. Benson's Lucia stories. But there are also lots of delicious science-fictional details, such

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as the traveling city of Terminator, which endlessly circles the planet on rails.

Of the rest of the stories, probably "The Disguise" is the least successful, another murder mystery set in a complicated future theatrical milieu, where actors are programmed with their roles; the story is counterpointed with one of those hopelessly complex Jacobean revenge dramas, and things get pretty tangled. But all in all, it's a diverting collection, and nice to have an SF author that not only knows who Monet, Vermeer, and Mussorgsky are, but assumes that the reader does, too.

GUNN PLAY

Crisis!
By James Gunn
Tor, $2.95 (paper)

James Gunn's new novel, *Crisis!*, is a downright peculiar one. It consists of six episodes with the same protagonist, a man with no memory of the past but, like T. H. White's Merlin, memories of the future. That, however, is the only resemblance to fantasy; the time is the near future. America is suffering a horrendous depression, and there's an energy shortage, and, all in all, things are bleak.

Each episode is more or less self-contained, lasts for anything from a day to a week, and in each, "Bill Johnson" (which our hero thinks is his name) solves a major problem for the world with his peculiar foresighted memory by changing circumstances from the ones that he foresees. With each reality change, his memory vanishes again.

In every instance, he wakes from sleep with a note from his former self briefly detailing what he has done, and telling himself what his name is, and that he is a man born in a hopeless future, sent to this time and place to alter events that created that future. That's all he ever knows about himself, and about all we ever find out about him.

So in a matter of weeks, if I read the subjective time right, he has solved the problems of: an immediate political crisis that has put the world on the verge of World War III; the energy shortage (by rescuing from a homicidal kidnapper the child that will invent the thermonuclear power generator); pollution; terrorism (by suggesting we build space habitats as homelands for all the displaced populations); and a couple of other such minor matters.

At first glance this all seems pretty naïve—"Bill" is a good listener and a sympathetic person, and almost everyone he enlists for aid in these matters quite soon comes to believe his story and goes along with him. But Gunn's work in the past belies this kind of simplistic interpretation; his writing has always been intelligent if not overexciting.

My guess is that he is playing with the stuff of SF to present a letter to the world; his idea of the major problems of the day, and their possible solutions which, if not simple, are at least within hu-

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manity's capabilities. This kind of medium with a message may not be to everyone's taste, but as such things go, it's readable and amusing. SF writers seem to tend toward guruship as they grow older; there's no reason why Mr. Gunn shouldn't take his crack at it.

THE FOUNTAINHENGE

Pillar of the Sky
By Cecelia Holland
Ballantine, $9.95 (paper)

High tech types tend to look down on the novel of prehistory as bastard SF at best, but that's not quite fair. Given, even now, our woeful lack of knowledge about the societies of preliterate man, any such novel is quite legitimate speculation in the science of anthropology. It is also as equally legitimate as an example of society-building as any novel of the future, though perforce more limited (we know a *little* more about the distant past than we do about the future).

As a matter of fact, the society that Cecelia Holland has created in her *Pillar of the Sky* reminded me a bit of that in Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. Holland would seem ideal as an author of this sort of work, since her credits include any number of highly respected historical novels, one SF novel that has a cult following *(Floating Worlds)*, and some in-between-type fantasies. And the dawn-age British culture she has created has a certain freshness. These Southern Britons (inhabiting several villages) have almost no contact with any other peoples in this sparsely populated world. It is a surprisingly pacific society; there is some killing, but little harshness, cruelty, or exploitation—none of these things seem to have been learned yet. Most problems are more or less talked to death or left to work themselves out.

The best of created primitive societies give some insight into a sort of world where certain human attitudes are simpler (and thereby giving some insight into modern, more complicated viewpoints). Holland does just this here. One realizes, for instance, the vast importance of the storyteller where there is no other fiction, of any sort. And the vast gulf between the sexes is all important, though the result is not necessarily a sexist society—here, the women have control in many areas of living.

The problem with *Pillar of the Sky* is the story, which is that of a determined individualist who is determined to build a great stone monument in a sacred place, and by doing so, changes his society irrevocably. Moloquin is an outcaste child (his mother had had sex with her brother), gradually and grudgingly accepted through being adopted by the female storyteller of the village. Enslaved briefly in a tiny encampment of traders from across the sea (Brittany?), he learns metal-working, returns to his people, takes charge, and gets Stonehenge built. He's a dreary hero, as obsessed men tend to be; he reminds me of that crazy architect in

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Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* who was always going on about getting his building up. And at 500 pages, *Pillar of the Sky* is just too long to sustain interest in an obsessive architect, no matter how interesting the society to which he belongs.

FOR MOVIE FANS ONLY

Future Visions
By Douglas Menville and R. Reginald
Newcastle, $12.95 (paper)
A Pictorial History of Science Fiction Films
By David Shipman
Salem House, $17.95

They just keep coming; these "pictorial histories" of SF movies; the only major difference seems to be each one covers the period since the last one was printed. Therefore, David Shipman's unimaginatively titled *A Pictorial History of Science Fiction Films* gives us material up to *Krull* while *Future Visions* by Douglas Menville and R. Reginald takes us almost up to the minute with *Explorers* and *The Bride* (considering the quality of those two, this may not be an advantage).

Both are laid out chronologically. *Future Visions* devotes most of its space to those movies released post-1977 *(Star Wars* et al.) since earlier movies were covered in detail in an earlier volume by the same authors; the book is subtitled "The New Golden Age of the Science Fiction Film," which gives an idea of the emphasis. The Shipman devotes a good deal of space to less recent flicks and also covers a good many fantasies, confusingly enough given its title.

As usual with these books, there are the pictures, and there is the text. One always has the feeling that the text is there to fill up space, and the authors have the sneaky feeling that no one will really read it (besides, everyone knows that the *real* movie fans can't read anyhow; they *only* look at pictures). This may be the reason so often that the texts are just plain boring; adequately written, informative, even opinionated, but still written *by* SF movie buffs *for* SF movie buffs, who know it all anyhow. Who *cares* what forgotten producer was responsible for *It Came From Beneath the Sea*? Shipman's text is typically leaden, with some bad goofs—one can only hope that it was a typesetter responsible for calling a popular character from a well-known film "Chawbacca." And there is a long discussion in text and caption as to who really played Pan in *The 7 Faces of Dr. Lao* with no resolution, which raises the suspicion that Shipman never saw the movie, though he lauds the Pan sequence—and rightfully so. (For the record, both John Ericson and Tony Randall were Pan—the tired Randall Pan transformed into the younger Ericson Pan by the woman's roused lustful thoughts.)

On the whole, Menville and Reginald do a better job; the text is snappier, intelligently opinionated without being dogmatic, and just plain more fun to read.

As for the *important* part (the

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pictures), *Future Visions* includes some goodies, but is unfortunately limited to black and white reproduction. The Shipman volume has color stills (not too well reproduced in some cases), but too many films are represented by publicity pictures and advertising posters (with creases showing), rather than stills directly from the movies themselves. There are included some marvelous unfamiliar shots from very early films, such as *Aelita* and *Alraune* (but, alas, the old familiars from *Caligari* and *Nosferatu*), and even more recent ones such as *Dune* and *Alien*. But despite this—and if you're as interested in reading as you are in looking at pictures—*Future Visions* is the better bargain.

WAR OF NERDS

Devine War
By Denis R. Caro
Arbor House, $15.95

One of the hurdles in writing about the future is explaining to the reader what kind of future you've set up. A mainstream writer can set a story in Chicago and assume the reader knows *something* about Chicago. But the SF writer has to fill in his future background for things to make some kind of sense. You can do it all in a lump at the beginning—at the risk of boring the reader before the story gets started. Or you can feed it in *along* with the story, doing a delicate juggling act to be sure the reader isn't too baffled by the unfamiliar milieu until you can get the facts put together for him. (" 'Glark,' said the *Semijar* of New Fluvium, mounting his *blumpf*. 'I declare war on the MacBem clan.' " Pretty soon you'd better say what a Semijar and a blumpf are, where New Fluvium is, who the MacBems are, and above all, *why* we're declaring war on them, or the reader loses interest rapidly.)

Then there are the writers who never do get around to telling you what's going on, or do it so late in the story that even when things get filled in, so much has happened in a void that they never add up. Denis R. Caro seems to be such a writer, and *Devine War* is such a novel. The reader is introduced to a lot of characters doing a lot of things: a wounded soldier being cared for by an intelligent, telepathic lioness; a gaggle of counter-intelligence agents involved in all sorts of personal and political hanky-panky; a talking desk (computerized) named Heathcliff; an ex(?)-agent named JoAnn Devine who is ambassador to a planet called Freehold; and a love-triangle aboard a spaceship that may be going to put down a rebellion on Freehold. Stir in a few flashbacks and hallucinations. The characters are for the most part unpleasant nerdish types and for much of the story, so little background information is given that you haven't the remotest idea what they are doing or why.

They're also *very* contemporary. Obviously it's impossible to create a future as truly incomprehensible

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(linguistically and otherwise) as the present would be to an ancient Assyrian, but you'd like some indication that things had changed. The dialogue of *Devine War* is straight out of a television thriller. And one character has inherited $11,000 in pennies. Now they may use pennies in the interstellar future, but I doubt it. For the most part, *Devine War* reads like a cast of modern TV actors improvising a none-too-coherent space opera.

TAME HUNT

The Wild Hunt of the Ghost Hounds
By Penelope Lively
Ace, $2.95 (paper)

The "Wild Hunt" of Celtic legend has shown up in more than a few fantasies, but I've not come across a novel in which it is the fantasy focal point, as it were, though it would seem a natural. Penelope Lively's *The Wild Hunt of the Ghost Hounds* (an icky title) takes a stab at it, in a diluted sort of way.

A girl comes to an English village near Exmoor to stay with her aunt; Lucy had vacationed in Hagworthy as a small child, but had not been back for years.

Just after she arrives, Hagworthy's vicar comes up with what he thinks is a dandy idea to attract tourists. He has found an ancient horned mask, and after some research, decides to revive the Horn Dance, a regional custom that hasn't been performed in a century.

Needless to say, the countryfolk are against it; as it turns out, for good reason. After rehearsals begin (using local young people), things start stirring. The problem is that Ms. Lively divides her supernatural manifestations. Part of what happens is reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's classic short story of modern ritual sacrifice, "The Lottery"; the male participants in the dance get possessed, and take off after another village youth who is something of a maverick. But there are intimations of something else moving on the moor that has been called up from the past.

The author's evocation of English small-town life is well done, and the uneasy feeling of things slowly getting out of hand is suspenseful. But unfortunately, when things come to a climax, this wild hunt is pretty tame.

SHOPTALK

A Voyage to Arcturus, David Lindsay's cult novel which a lot of people seem to have been looking for since it's been out of print, has been republished in a trade paperback (Citadel, $5.95) . . . Invaluable to collectors, and just dedicated readers, is a new reference book, the title of which is self-explanatory: *Science Fiction and Fantasy Series and Sequels: Vol. 1: Books* edited by Tim Cottrill, Martin N. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh (Garland, $35.00) . . .

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The Good Doctor rides again, in a rare foray beyond NYC. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me a SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St., #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 273-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's a good time to call cons; let them know who you are & why you're calling right off. When writing cons, send a SASE. Look for me at cons behind the "Filthy Pierre" badge, playing a keyboard.

OCTOBER, 1986

10-12—**RoVaCon.** For info. write: **Box 117, Salem, VA 24153.** Or call: **(703) 389-9400** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Salem VA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Alan Dean Foster, Hal (Mission of Gravity) Clement, Star Trek stars. At Salem High School.

10-12—**BoucherCon.** Sheraton Inner Harbor, Baltimore, MD. **(301) 730-1378.** Mystery fans' WorldCon.

10-12—**ConClave.** Hilton, Plymouth MI. Greg ("Blood Music") Bear, fans John & Joanne Hall.

10-12—**NonCon.** Regency Motor Inn, Calgary AB. Judith Merrill, artist Ken Macklin, William Warren.

10-12—**ArmadilloCon.** Sheraton Crest, Austin TX. William Gibson, Lewis Shiner, fan Debbie Notkin.

11-12—**OctoCon.** Rancho Tropicana, Santa Rosa CA. F. Pohl, D. Gerrold, M. Bradley, J. Pournelle.

17-19—**FantastiCon.** Red Bluff CA. This con has been cancelled. Try OctoCon the week before.

17-19—**ConTact.** Ramada Inn, Evansville IN. D. R. Palmer, Bill Breuer, T. Zahn, Stanley Schmidt.

18-19—**Prism.** Holiday Inn, Lenexa KS. G. (Star Trek) Roddenberry, artist Lucy A. Synk, J. Bailey.

24-26—**ICon, Box 525, Iowa City, IA 52244. (319) 396-6487.** Cedar Rapids, IA. R. Asprin, P. Foglio.

24-26—**ConStellation, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815.** O. S. Card, M. Randall, R. & V. L.-Lindahn.

30-Nov. 2—**World Fantasy Con, Box 3251 Darlington Br., Pawtucket RI 02861.** Ramsey Campbell, Chas. L. Grant, J. K. Potter, Douglas Winter. The fantasy fans' WorldCon. Attendance limited to 750.

NOVEMBER, 1986

7-9—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 283-0802.** Ed Bryant, G. R. R. Martin, Salmonson.

7-9—**SciCon, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670.** Virginia Beach VA. C. J. Cherryh, M. (the Vampire) Gear.

8-10—**TusCon, Box 26822, Tucson AZ 85776.** Vernor Vinge, James Corrick, Hilde & Bruce D. Arthurs.

14-16—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101.** I*S*A*A*C A*S*I*M*O*V, Pohl, artist Mike Whelan.

AUGUST, 1987

27-Sept. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton, U.K. WorldCon 1987.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5-8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. NASFiC 1987, held since WorldCon's abroad.

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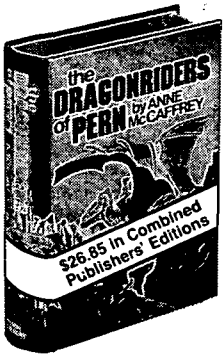

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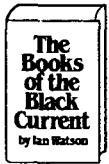

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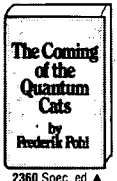

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